掟上今日子の備忘録

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The Memorandum of Okitegami Kyouko

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Chapter 1:

Pleasure to Meet you, Kyouko-san

1

"Don't move! There's a thief among us!"

Lab head Emii's yell resounded though the laboratory... In contrast to that honey-comb-like name, the voice rung out in a heavy bass.

"No one's taking a step out of this room."

His voice grew even louder, turning into a hysteric shriek.
With the intensity as if a squad of policemen suddenly entered- or rather- as if an armed robber pushed his way in, I reflexively put my hands up. If the place wasn't such a mess, I'm sure I would have planted my face to the floor without the slightest hesitation and folded my hands behind my head. While it wasn't as blatant as a newbie (add on timid) employee like me, the reactions of the others were something similar: They stopped their hands in the middle of work, looking dubiously at lab head Emii.

"What seems to be the matter, lab head Emii?"

A little while passed and the first one to ask the question was the one who'd known the man the longest- in other words, the person most accustomed to listening to his threatening shrieks- a certain assistant lab head Yurine. Of course, even for assistant lab head Yurine, something seemed off with Emii, and despite her usual cool composure, she seemed somewhat bewildered.

"The backup data is gone! Someone must have stolen it!"

Lab head Emii answered as if trying to raise hell.

The backup data was gone.

It sounded so stupid, for the next instant I failed to grasp the meaning of those words, but as expected, the three including assistant lab head Yurine reacted at once. They each stood from their seat in surprise… only to receive a reprimand.

“I told you not to move!”

Lab head Emii repeated.

“When you say gone… did you check carefully?”

Honda-san said as he reluctantly, rather begrudgingly took back his seat. From the start, he didn’t have the best relations with lab head Emii, but even if you subtracted that from the equation, the antipathy towards a superior who suddenly made a statement distrustful towards his comrades in arms was unbearable, it seems.

“And by backup, you mean the SD card, right? Couldn’t it have carelessly fallen under the desk or so…”

Hearing that, lab head Emii checked at his feet with a surprising amount of humility- the laboratory was a jumbled as usual, the area around each persons’ desk especially chaotic, so if it fell, surely the likes of a thin and small object such as an SD card would be difficult to find so quickly.

Thinking back, the fact that he obediently followed Honda-san… researcher Honda Eichi’s observation meant that lab head Emii had yet to check the floor, he had started such a tumultuous ruckus without so much as checking. Concurrently, if our lost item were to be found under his desk, then with some spite, everyone would take it as the usual false alarm, perhaps having a laugh over it another day, but unfortunately, the store was sold out of that plot.

“It’s really not there! And there’s no way it could be there because someone stole it!”

Lab head Emii exposed even greater anger. Put through a needless amount of work, his rage had been resuscitated.

“That can’t be… you’re saying one of us stole it? How terrible.”

The one speaking so sorrowfully was Gifube-san. She really looked like she would burst into tears. I did hold an impulse to rush over and support her up but unfortunately, as a man who could foresee the development that followed, no matter how guilt-tripped I was, I didn’t have the leisure to pay mind to researcher Gifube.

“Ah… no, but it’s not there! When it was definitely placed there not a moment ago!”

A different sort from Honda-san, Gifube-san’s quiet retreat flustered lab head Emii for a moment, but in the end he still returned to his own pet theory.

Even if it wasn’t under the desk, the thought he might be misunderstanding something seemed to be too far out to consider… I don’t want to speak ill of my own employer- especially not lab head Emii who hired someone like me, I could never do enough to thank him- but the man just had that side to him. Once he makes a decision, he can’t think of it any other way.

You could call his obstinacy a certain form of natural gift; it was precisely because of that gift he was properly achieving results, and without it, I doubt he’d have an entire laboratory left to him, but… it’s quite a hassle to be part of the surroundings he makes a mess of.

“Then let’s all search together, lab head. Shouldn’t that be fine?”

Assistant head Yurine proposed.

“A bounce could’ve sent it sliding elsewhere… if we split up and search, I’m sure it’ll be found.”

"... Very well. But until it's found, I won't allow anyone to leave this room."

Compromising as it were, dripping with dissatisfaction, lab head Emii nodded... for the hour that followed, the five of us were taken off our usual duties, searching every crevice of the laboratory but if you'll let me speak the conclusion, we didn't achieve any results. If you call the lab's grand cleaning no one was looking forward to a result, perhaps it was, but there was no way such an achievement would lower lab head Emii's dander.

Still, now that it had come to that, we could no longer one-sidedly blame lab head Emii for abruptly shouting without any preface... as truth would have it, the SD card that contained a backup for the lab's research data wasn't anywhere in the room. That reckless theft accusation aside, the loss of a precious media in itself was definitely an event that transpired. The fact that lab head Emii, the very worst of us at keeping things in order, participated in the investigation made it all the more apparent.

"B-but even if it's lost, it's just a backup, right? If the original data on your computer is safe, then..."

As Honda-san attempted to soothe him,

"Whether it's a backup or not, any information leaks and it's over!"

He was promptly cut off and done away with.

Right, that was the problem.

The data on the lost SD card was put under a so-called confidential classification... apparently. As a new hire I don't really get it, but that's precisely why a thorough security and management system are imposed on this Emii Laboratory and this Sarashina research institute.

Even if it was just a backup, 'Thank god the original data's intact,' wasn't enough to cover it.

“Step forward already! Whoever stole it, if you speak up now, I’ll forgive you!”

No thief would ever name themselves on those words, but still lab head Emii screeched them, sending a strong glare to the person positioned closest to him: me.

“Give it a rest, lab head. The fact it didn’t come out despite how hard we searched means the backup is certainly lost, but suspecting one of us is…”

As she said that, assistant head Yurine sent a worried glance at me.

“That’s right, while we’ve had our ups and downs, we’ve come all the way here together. Don’t say that any of us would put it all to waste… though it’s been only two months since our assistant came in.”

While he refuted lab head Emii’s words, at the end, Honda-san turned to me.

“But whatever the case, let’s all look through the room one more time. It’s not good to suspect people without any evidence. In dubio pro reo, they say. That’s right, no matter how suspicious he is, there’s no evidence.”

At the end of her spiel, as if mustering up her courage Gifube-san stood in front to protect me in an attempt to persuade our superior… and to me, “You’ll be alright,” she winked.

To summarize, everyone was looking at me.

Everyone was suspecting me.

Gifube-san alone was seemingly sticking up for me, but covering me in a situation like this held practically the same meaning as doubting me.

“E-ergh… p,”

My voice shook. My body shook. My being showered with everyone's attention, I felt like I would be rendered mute... but even so, I somehow managed to say what I had to. Just as a suspect would cry out to exercise their right to an attorney.

"P- please let me call a detective!"

2

…… Among mystery novel fans, there is a notion that has surpassed joke to the realm of cliché: ‘Travelling alongside a murderer with ill intent towards you is many times safer than traveling with a famed detective who sees you favorably.’

Dragged into complex cases wherever they go, exchanging banter with a great detective who’s encountered innumerable heinous crimes over the course of their lives; well, it might be an esprit of love, but even so, the complex cases they’re enraptured in wherever they go, the innumerable heinous crimes they encounter, they’re splendid enough to properly resolve them.

I’d like you to try imagining it.

Simply dragged into case after case, simply encountering heinous crimes… if there was an individual with nothing but that going for them, they would be the worst possible person to travel with.

That’s me.

No, that’s not all there is.

The detective isn’t me. I, Kakushidate Yakusuke am seen as the cause of all difficult cases enraptured and heinous crimes encountered… suspected as the culprit, doubted as a suspect, thought of as the ringleader, regarded as the man behind the curtain. Back in elementary school, whenever something went missing in class, do you remember one guy who everyone treated as the culprit without any real reason? It could be a him or a her, but that was my form in the days of yore. It can be a him or a her, but what do you think would happen if that person grew up just like that? That question is one I’ve used my lifetime to answer.

It's absolutely nothing to brag about, but I've experienced a wide variety of trouble from my early years… every time, it would be made out as my fault, I would be the villain, everyone would blame me, and all souls present would hang me out to dry.

If you'll let me be blunt, each and every one of them were false allegations, reasonless bashings, mistaken indictments my body had no recollection of. Of course I'm no saint, and I've no intent to assert I'm an amiable young man of upright and virtuous character, but over the course of my life, I've never once committed an act heinous enough for the sun to shy from me… as far as I know. Yet each and every time, somehow no matter what happens, I become the suspicious one.

It was like that from my student days, but after going out into society, it became striking… it's brought trouble to my employment, and even now, I'm moving from job to job. Being suspect of a scandal and fired was of the better sort, and there was a time where a large majority of the company employees went missing and the company itself ceased to exist. Naturally that time as well, I was interrogated as a material witness.

Truth or lie, ever since that incident, I've heard rumor the public police are keeping constant surveillance of my movements… It's not like I don't feel sorry for so much taxpayer dollar being invested in a man with no hidden side or background, but that's not something I myself can do anything about.

I've been told me taking on a timid attitude with my large body is what invites in the suspicion, but it's not like I grew to one ninety centimeters because I wanted to, and it's not like I'm fond of the character contained in this large build. If like some VIP my life was targeted and that's what caused an incident I could accept it, but I'm a side character through and through.

Not a famed detective or famed criminal or gentleman thief.

In mystery novel terms, my name wouldn't make it to character list at the front. Just a character actor coincidentally encountered at the scene. Suspecting someone like me is just a waste of time, and even if

hypothetically I was the culprit, the author would be slandered for making the case too unfair to solve.

But if that 'coincidentally' repeated a hundred thousand times, anyone would think this guy is bad business… to be honest, even if I think so (by the way, a hundred thousand isn't that great of an exaggeration). By that, I became a man even more easy to doubt in times of emergency, making me even more mindful of others' eyes, and turning my attitude much more cowardly… causing people to suspect me more.

It's a vicious cycle.

I should just give up, I was just born under the wrong star, but to live in a modern society where the connection between person and person is most important of all and trust holds more weight than anything, it is a destiny much too painful.

That being the case, it's my life so I have to live it… to maintain a life with at least the minimum level of health and culture, I have to protect myself.

And the self-defense mechanism I've picked up is the hiring of detectives.

The detective hotline. The contact information of detectives I can count on if anything happens has been faithfully crammed into my cellphone… unlike novels and TV, they rarely encounter any real mysteries, and I'm in no way sparing with offering up pending cases.

It's simply supply and demand. I am their regular customer, their usual, their habitue… and this is yet another thing that I take absolutely no pride in.

In regards to the missing Emii Laboratory backup data incident, in want of a great detective to clear up the suspicions placed upon me, I selected the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko-san.

Among the great detectives I know, Kyouko-san boasts the greatest abilities… or not, but she's still the most famous… no, I guess not. She

doesn't have a hundred percent success rate in crime-solving, and she's not affiliated with any large organization (The Okitegami Detective Agency is just her personal office). If I had to phrase it without fear of misunderstanding, she's an exceedingly quirky woman, and she's by no means someone easy to use. But regardless, taking the various conditions into account, I really had no one but Kyouko-san to rely on this time around.

The reason being, as far as I knew, she was the 'fastest' detective... but even that 'fastest' was not the catchphrase used to signify her as a detective.

Okitegami Kyouko.

Her catchword: 'Forgetful'.

3

“Umm, excuse me. Is this the laboratory of an Emii Kouro-san?”

Following a knock, a hesitant voice… after assistant head Yurine undid the lock, the one who entered the room was Kyouko-san.

A smallish build and plain clothing, the hair that topped it all off was white, so from afar it might look as if an elderly woman had made an appearance, but Kyouko-san was twenty-five, same as me. A close glance and her lustrous youth was enough to tell instantly.

The head of a detective agency, a proud and independent woman, and then there was someone constantly troubled for work, who would undoubtedly be fired from the Sarashina Research Institute the way things were going. The only point we really shared was our age, but… whatever the case, I rushed over.

“Kyouko-san!”

I called out.

“Thank you for coming over, you’re a real lifesaver! It’s been a while, but I’m glad to see you look well! I know it’s not something to say at a time like this, but I’m happy to be able to see you again! Though I’d be happier if this wasn’t the situation…”

Overcome with emotion, I tried taking her hand, but Kyouko-san softly retracted it,

“Pleasure to meet you. Umm, who might you be?”

She said.

Relocking the door, assistant head Yurine looked over Kyouko-san's reaction with wonder… it was only natural, the famed detective I sought help from with great fanfare was treating this like our first meeting.

But that one was my fault. I cleared my throat.

"I-I'm the client, Kakushidate. Kakushidate Yakusuke. I have been in your care a number of times."

I divulged my history.

Not just with my mouth, I took out my license and presented it… while the exchange may have reeked of overacting, I was pressed for time.

Kyouko-san compared me with the details on the license, "Is that so," she said without any particular emotion… to me, it may have been a 'long-awaited reunion,' but to she, the forgetful detective, this was our 'first time meeting'. It would be mistaken to demand any deep emotion from her.

"Then once more. I am the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko. This time… or is it this time as well? I have received your order, Kakushidate-san."

Said Kyouko-san as she handed over a business card. I don't even know how many cards I've received from her at this point.

She moved here and there around the room, to lab head Emii, to assistant head Yurine, to researcher Honda and researcher Gifube, "I'm Okitegami Kyouko," "I'm Okitegami Kyouko" she went on to give her greeting… when it really was her first time meeting them, as expected of her to exchange cards starting with the highest ranking. Honda-san and Gifube-san were of the same rank, but Honda-san had been at the lab an extra year… regardless, they were of the same age, and I doubt that was something one could figure out without exchanging words.

Finishing her round of greetings, Kyouko-san returned to me.

“I have already heard the case. I just have to find the SD card containing the backup data of the research carried out in this room, do I? Meaning it’s a lost item search.”

She turned to lab head Emii and said gently.

Around two hours had transpired since the loss came to light, and while chief Emii had regained some composure more or less, it seems he had yet to escape from his ‘thief’ theory.

“That’s not all. Identify whoever stole it.”

He responded.

“I see. But is that really so important?”

Kyouko-san spoke as if playing the fool. She was the same as ever… no, this person is never not the same as ever. Because even if her nature changes, it will quite quickly return to normal.

“What’s important is to prevent the disclosure of information, and not…”

“Don’t be stupid! There’s no way in hell I can work with a traitor!”

At the lab head’s yell, I made my body scarce… but Kyouko-san remained unconcerned, at most shrugging her shoulders. Threats and intimidation didn’t get through to her. I won’t forget the Set Sail Incident, where she didn’t move a single eyebrow at a real machine gun being thrust at her… of course, she’s already forgotten it.

“Understood. But the original request I took up from Kakushidate-san was to clear up the suspicions placed on him… if it turns out that Kakushidate-san is the culprit, that will go against the best interest of my client.”

What is she even saying, this girl.

I thought, but it remained a thought.

Of course, in an occupation where she was to suspect any and everything, this was a clear show of mettle… very well, rather than someone who suspects only me, someone who suspects everyone is far better.

"… You mean to say, in the case Kakushidate-kun is the culprit, you'll just be working for free? If that's your concern, I think the research institute will take over the fee."

Assistant head Yurine said. To someone like her who'd walked her way here on a respectable life, I'm sure she could only think the title of detective as a shady occupation.

"You couldn't call that fair. In the case there is a culprit, meaning the loss of the backup data was a crime brought about by someone's malicious intent, the research institute should take up the fee without exception. How does that sound?"

While Kyouko-san remained thoroughly calm, it might not have sounded like that, but they were talking about quite a serious amount of money… as a privately managed detective by trade, she was firm in that regard.

It's not like we were in a sealed room where we'd have to pay in advance, and from her point of view, it was surely more worthwhile to make an accrued expense with a research institute rather than a youngster like me.

"Got it."

She nodded.

"But in the case that you're unable to solve it…"

"Then I'm fine with working for free. That's the sort of system our firm works under."

It's piecework payment, she said.

With a smile, Kyouko-san responded. That smile enveloped me with a sense of relief… of course, nothing had been resolved yet, so it was too soon for that. It wasn't as if Kyouko-san was an omnipotent detective who could solve anything.

"More importantly… is this really alright?"

The one who posed Kyouko-san the question somewhat rudely was Honda-san. Rather than it being a problem with Kyouko-san, he had been sealed in the room over two hours and was getting a little irritated… while everyone held the same conditions, Honda-san boasted, next to lab head Emii, the second shortest temper. With lingering resentment, he was still strongly pushing the theory the loss was due to lab head Emii's carelessness… therefore, it was only natural he felt the situation was considerably unfair.

"The reason an outsider was invited into the room was because Kakushidate-kun said you would be alright and gave his stamp of approval, but… I still wouldn't want a detective tampering with this room full of confidential matters."

"You needn't worry about that. As you can see, I don't carry a smartphone or camera on me."

Kyouko-san spread out her arms as she said that.

It seems she had already undergone a body check at the institute's entrance.

"What's more… everything I see and hear today, I'll have forgotten it all by tomorrow."

4

Solve any case in a day.

Those were the words on the sign of the Okitegami detective agency, and at first when I was dragged into that 'Many-Body Problem Incident' I was fascinated by those words and jumped at them. But that phrase wasn't meant to advertise the 'fastest detective', I soon learned it was to warn of the 'forgetful detective.'

Detective, Okitegami Kyouko.

Her memory resets every day.

In medical terms, perhaps it's a form of anterograde amnesia, but whatever the case, no matter what investigations she carries out, no matter what she hears, once she sleeps and wakes, she forgets it.

It doesn't matter who she's dealing with, it doesn't matter the event.

It's an endless repetition of first meetings and first experiences.

An inability to take charge of long-term cases is a fatal attribute for a detective but flipping that around, she could calmly tread into any manner of confidential matters, giving her an overwhelming advantage no other detective could hope to hold.

She'll forget, after all.

The most certainty anyone else could hope for would be a detective's work ethic, meaning there were no guaranteed means to maintain a duty of confidentiality… therefore, it is clients with troubles they can't tell anyone about or circumstances that must never be disclosed that flood to her office.

She generally doesn't accept cases that can't be solved in a day, and with her nature, she doesn't accept any work reservations. Her way of work had various pros and cons in the industry, but because of her system, she can answer sudden cries for help like this, so to me, she's undoubtedly among my top detectives.

With misgivings of information disclosure and fear of scandals leaking out, lab head Emii had originally been reluctant to call a detective, but I strongly asserted those fears were unnecessary… I lie. In truth, I tried my best through an incoherent ramble.

Kyouko-san fluently explained that part.

"During the investigation, I will likely be calling you in turn to hear what you have to say, but have no fear. No matter what I'm told, no matter what I see, once I sleep and wake, I'll forget it all. Even the business cards you've given me, once I've confirmed my payment, I shall return them. The fact you even met me, come tomorrow, it will disappear… at the very least to me."

"…"

As Kyouko-san went on about such things with a beaming smile, Gifube-san looked on as if seeing something uncanny… that was the correct response. No matter the situation, I will forget about you tomorrow. No one could feel good after hearing such a thing… what's more, in Kyouko-san's case, that was a simple fact.

It was the same for me.

Every time we meet, when she says 'Pleasure to meet you,' it's honestly painful… even more so when it has to be a wonderful woman like Kyouko-san.

Lab head Emii folded his arms.

“Got it. Okitegami-san, I’ll appoint you in the search for the culprit. I don’t mind if you hear out whatever you want to… but even so, there are some things in this room it would be troublesome for an amateur to touch carelessly. Whenever you’re about to touch something, make sure you get someone’s approval.”

He said.

“Understood. Hmm… Then there isn’t much time, so let’s get right to it. Can I borrow a place where I can hear people out one by one? I’d prefer a small private room.”

“A private room? I can’t approve of that. The culprit cannot leave this room. If the culprit goes outside, I fear the data will flow out with them. This room is cut off from the internet and cell signals, but there are places in the facility where that isn’t the case.”

“But this does not sound realistic. Driving everyone to fast without letting them use the restroom deserves the term unjust confinement. Any investigations carried out under such a state are close to meaningless. It’s akin to beating the information out of them.”

Lab head Emii wouldn’t budge, but neither would Kyouko-san. I’ll admit I might see her in a favorable light, but as she smiled and remained firm, it looked to me that Kyouko-san had the upper hand.

“I shall take responsibility and keep a close watch to make sure the person I’m investigating doesn’t take any peculiar action. If you have them undergo a body check whenever they leave the room, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“… Very well, I’ll permit it.”

Lab head Emii said, given a bit of time.

The reason he jumped onto her proposal there was quite likely because he gained an excuse to carry out the body checks he had probably wanted to

carry out from the start. With two of the room's inhabitants being women, there was no way he could perform one, but with a third party, what's more a woman like Kyouko-san to carry them out, he could save face.

To not suspect anyone unreasonably, after receiving too many false accusations, I know that best, but now that the item hasn't been found after a full search of the room, we were dealing with a single small and flat SD card, and the probability someone had it on their person wasn't low by any means.

"I'll arrange so you can use a small meeting room… but Okitegami-san. Even if they prove innocent in the body check, I'll have you promise not to take an eye off of them during the questioning."

"Leave it to me."

Kyouko-san smiled and nodded.

And she spoke.

"I definitely won't forget it. Don't worry, my memory's on the better side… if it's within the day."

5

And so Kyouko-san began her detective work… the start time was five forty. Even if she's supposed to solve any case in a day, that doesn't strictly mean within twenty-four hours, it's more specifically until 'Kyouko-san falls asleep'.

As far as I know, Kyouko-san wakes up at six and sleeps at eleven, the proprietor of a decisively healthy life custom… taking that into consideration, this investigation might run until twelve at latest.

Searching for a single lost SD card, it might be simple to say, a small incident one might even think an everyday mystery, but the data contained on it was extensive, what's more, it held a jokingly high value. It couldn't quite be called everyday. If it developed into a responsibility problem, it'll probably not be me but lab head Emii's head that'll fly, and in the worst-case scenario, this might tie into the continued existence of the Sarashina Research Institute. Thinking back on that, and just how intensely lab head Emii wailed, this wasn't an incident he hoped to resolve in a day… we should proceed with caution and gone over the proper procedure to investigate the whereabouts of the SD card.

But without any evidence, the simple fact I was a new hire (Also the simple fact my behavior is suspicious) cast suspicion me, so now wasn't the time for that… I had to give it my all to prove my own innocence.

Though I do find it sad that means leaving it to someone else.

If I had the capacity of a detective… it's not like I never dreamed of it, but unfortunately, I know full well who I am. I know I'm no more than a side character. I'm even more sure of it after seeing a talent like Kyouko-san up close… only able to maintain a day's worth of memory, given a fate that should make it difficult just to live her everyday life, a human like her who's able to make a name for herself as a superior detective, that's who people call a lead role.

“Now then, you’re the last one. Kakushidate-san. A pleasure to work with you, please come this way.”

Returning to the lab with assistant head Yurine who underwent the fourth questioning session, Kyouko-san beckoned to me… up to now, Kyouko-san had heard out lab head Emii, Gifube-san and Honda-san in that order.

I couldn’t tell if there was some meaning to this order… it didn’t seem to be by rank or age, and perhaps there was no meaning at all. But the fact I came last seemed to be clearly intentional.

Whatever the case, I tried to exit to the corridor when,

“Wait.”

Or so Honda-san detained me.

“Isn’t it bad to leave Kakushidate-kun’s body check to Okitegami-san? He’s technically her employer.”

He spoke in a tone tying his actions to venting his frustration but I see, that did make sense. On top of a lack of evidence, as an adult with a sense of judgment, it wasn’t as if he seriously doubted me, but it seems he was unable to wipe away the feeling I was suspicious.

Resisting was a waste of time so, “Understood. Then whoever wants to can carry out my body check,” I threw it to the wind… if I took on a sullen attitude there, I knew the distrust towards me would only accelerate.

The two women refused, but Honda-san didn’t, and I even had the honor of lab head Emii personally groping around my body. Result: innocent.

Naturally so. I walked into the hallway with some piece of mind until,

“Umm, I haven’t carried out my check yet.”

Kyouko-san wouldn't let me pass. She really is a firm person…

As she was meeting me for the first time, it would be irrational to ask her to trust me, so I obediently followed her lead… unlike lab head Emii and Honda-san, this one was a skillful body check that hit all the essentials.

"Yes, you're clear. Please come this way."

Kyouko-san led me to the small meeting room. I had rarely stretched my feet to the floors beyond the Emii laboratory, and it was also the first time I ever entered that meeting room. Rather than a small meeting room, it was arranged more like an interrogation room (I've entered real ones of those a number of times)… being alone with Kyouko-san in such a narrow room sped up my heart just a bit.

But those were one-sided feelings on my side; from her point of view, being alone in a narrow room with a mysterious suspicious-acting giant she was meeting for the first time was surely not an environment anyone would find pleasant. Not that she showed it. She was unconcerned as ever.

"Kakushidate Yakusuke-san. I already got the opportunity to hear you out when I received your call, but there are a number of things I'd like to confirm once more."

Kyouko-san swiftly entered the main subject… to her, time was many times more valuable than it was to any of us. It was no exaggeration to say our lives were no more than a day to her.

"You say you've become acquainted with me a number of times, but please do not let your mind wander there. Even if there is something you wish to reminisce over, please restrain yourself as much as you can… the episodes of you and me are ones I've never seen."

That distancing remark was a little saddening but I convinced myself it couldn't be helped. That's what makes her the forgetful detective, Okitegami Kyouko.

“How long have you worked at this Sarashina Research Institute?”

“From around two months ago… I was hired as an assistant. But even if you call me a lab assistant, I don’t know any of the technical stuff. Organizing the data, brewing tea, taking out the trash, I get the feeling all the odd jobs are left to me, but…”

The more I spoke, the more it started sounding like an excuse. It was my bad habit. I’ve been doubted so much on all sides the excuses started looking more decent. But the reason I had lost my composure here and now wasn’t because of the suspicions directed towards me, perhaps it was because Kyouko-san was staring at me so intently.

“A-anyhow, I’m someone who doesn’t know anything and the fact they hired me is… er rather, we can’t have all the smart researchers taking care of the trivial stuff.”

“I see. So they hired you for the same reason they trust an investigator who’ll forget everything by tomorrow.”

While I worried her phrasing had become cynical, like that, Kyouko-san showed her approval.

I was just a bit happy, it was a slight load off my mind.

I’m sure it was impossible to line me up with a talent like Kyouko-san, but the factor that decided our hiring, in this case, perhaps it really was somewhat similar.

“I got sacked from my last job, and when I was troubled with finding work, an acquaintance who knows some people introduced me to lab head Emii… I thought I’d be able to pull it off here.”

No, I wonder.

Perhaps I thought it would someday come to this, just as it always has… though it happened far too early, far earlier than I expected.

“Well then, there’s something I must ask precisely because of your position. No, the other four have told me plenty on the subject, but the words of a specialist are often too hard for an outsider to understand…”

Kyouko-san doesn’t take memos. She doesn’t make recordings, and she doesn’t organize investigation records on a laptop… she inputs it all into her head. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to reset once the case is closed, but even if it lasted just a day, perfectly memorizing five peoples’ worth of oral questioning, her memory was fearsome after all.

And since she forgot it all by the next day, it was a complete mismatch.

“In the first place, what is this Sarashina Research Institute even researching?”

“Various things, apparently… I hear it’s got a lot to do with imaging and optics. Research is divvied up, so I only have limited knowledge of what the other stations are researching but the Emii laboratory is mainly charged with stereopsis, it seems.”

With so many uncertainties, even I could tell my testimony was no use but Kyouko-san nodded as she went on.

“Stereopsis, is it?”

She repeated my words.

“Yes. To put it plainly, they’re looking into 3D technology… um, you can see it in movies and stuff, right?”

“Ah. Where you put on those glasses…”

As she said that, Kyouko-san touched the round glasses on her face.

“It’s annoying having glasses on glasses so I don’t really go for them.”

Even if she did, she’s forget it.

“The research lab head Emii is doing is to enable anyone from any seat to see an image in 3D without having to wear glasses. Well, with 3D imaging, there’s holograms and other various things, but… where we are now, if you want to make a 3D movie, you’ll need to tape with a special camera, and that alone eats considerably into the budget, but if you use the new techniques lab head Emii is proposing, that cost can be cut to less than a tenth or something…”

It’s all secondhand knowledge, what’s more, I myself don’t understand it, so I’ve no idea how accurate this explanation is, but in her attempt to understand it, “I see,” Kyouko-san said.

“Being able to see a movie in 3D without having to wear those strange-colored glasses sounds wonderful.”

“…”

By strange-colored glasses, what might she be pointing to… I’d like to think not, but is she referring to those red and blue cellophane things?

I can’t determine how far Kyouko-san’s memory is reset with every sleep… the memories lost are one day’s worth. If you phrase it like that, it might not seem a lot, but if that continued on a year, that would mean she’s lost a year’s worth of memory.

I first met Kyouko-san two years ago, but at that point, she had already stopped piling memories for a long time. The more time passes by, the more the time stream leaves her behind. It was inevitable she couldn’t perfectly understand the subject matter of an institute researching the latest technology.

With the conditions of confidentiality and speed, Kyouko-san was the only detective I could depend on this time, but from her perspective, I might

have requested a job she's unsuited for… all would be well if I could cover for her, but I can't even fulfill the role of Watson.

"… But if it's lab head Emi's original construct, then even if the stereopsis data leaks out, would it really be so troubling? Even if someone knew, would another be able to recreate it?"

"That's not the case. I'll be borrowing assistant head Yurine's words here, but the foundation of lab head Emii's research is a change in thought process. An innovation by combining already-existing technology in an unexpected pairing… if that method ever makes it way outside, it will go ahead in no time."

Even if it was just for odd jobs, the fact they hired someone like me made it clear the Sarashina Research Institute was by no means a large organization- in a competition of power games with a large corporation, it had no chance of victory. Wringing out knowledge, proceeding things behind closed doors and stabbing into a blind spot was the only tactic they could take, that's precisely why information was life or death.

"I see, then this really is an estimated loss of several hundred million yen… ah, that sum was one Honda-san presented."

"It's not a problem of money, I think everyone's afraid all the research they did will go poof…"

That fear was something a new hire, a non-specialist like me couldn't understand. Granted, I doubt they could understand the fear of someone doubted without reason either.

"… As a general investigation policy, as things stand, I still think it's reasonable to look at this as a simple loss due to carelessness, but if the data is so important, I also feel there's no way Emii-san would lose it. That's something I've heard from everyone so far."

From that stereotypical preface, I thought she would ask about my alibi, but it seems that wasn't the case.

“If someone did steal the SD Card, who do you think it would be.”

Straight on, er rather, it was a considerably intrusive question. Did Kyouko-san ask this to everyone? Then I’m sure everyone answered Assistant Kakushidate…

“I don’t know. I don’t think anyone has a motive…”

I answered honestly. If I could give a clear answer here, I’d be the one playing the detective.

“If the lab closes down, everyone will lose their jobs.”

“But if they brought the data in question along, couldn’t another institution hire them?”

“It’s a small industry. If you do something like that, you’ll be outed in no time.”

Of course, if you’re going to do it, do it in a way you won’t get found out, but even for that, the risk was too high. It was a bit too far to be an action for profit.

“You have a point. Then how about we think about this as an offense committed by someone with a grudge towards Emii-san? Completely neglecting any financial gains, simple harassment.”

“……”

They concealed research data because they wanted to see the lab head in a fluster? It seems in too bad taste for mischief…

“Thinking of the data’s value, naturally, it wouldn’t end with just a spot of mischief. You couldn’t call it simple bad taste either. It has all the qualifications of a criminal case.”

Kyouko-san said plainly. Her ethics were clear in these matters… she wasn't the sort of detective who praised criminals as artists.

"But if you think about it like that, then some things can be explained. Instead of taking it out of the room, they only intended to conceal it somewhere within… they might have even crushed and disposed of it. In that case, they wouldn't ever have to worry about being exposed."

"It's true lab head Emii's conduct may be overbearing… I can't say he's good at dealing with people, but I don't think he was hated enough to receive any harassment with such ill intent."

Being labeled a thief, surely everyone's mood would take a shot, but they were all aware his conduct was something stemming from his genius- they weren't seriously irritated, it was just 'the usual'.

"Right, that's what everyone said."

Kyouko-san all-too-easily went into her own theory.

"If the real data was stolen or damaged, it would mean this action was to obstruct Emii-san's research, but the SD card lost was- to that end- a backup. Though it seems Emii-san has no intent to discard the possibility. He's apparently well aware of his lack of popularity… then let me change the question. Who do you think is most likely not to be the culprit?"

Another peculiar question from Kyouko-san.

I spoke whatever came to mind.

"I know very well that I'm not the culprit, but if I exclude myself… first off, lab head Emii can't be it. He's the real victim here. The one who's known him the longest, assistant head Yurine is the second least suspicious. With her office, she'll have to take joint responsibility, and the damage she suffers is something similar. Honda-san and Gifube-san are…"

There, I struggled for my words.

If I decided the third least suspicious person, I would simultaneously have to decide the fourth. Meaning I would be labeling the most suspicious person… without any definite evidence. It was what had been done to me, the most painful thing of all… I couldn't do that to another.

Taking in my silence, Kyouko-san,

"Kakushidate-san, you're a kind person I see."

She said.

I was happy to hear that from someone like Kyouko-san, but just as it had been with the last time she told me that, when I think of how she'll forget me and any evaluations of me come tomorrow, it really does feel lonely.

I spoke to shake off that feeling.

"Honda-san and Gifube-san see each other as rivals. They're both the same age, and I'm sure they're somewhat conscious of one another. It feels like they're having some sort of competition. Honda-san's been at the company longer, but it seems assistant head Yurine sees Gifube-san higher… those discrepancies are only accelerating their contest. I think it's a healthy relationship, but it's a bit suspenseful to watch."

Or so I forcefully ended my list with information not particularly relevant to the case.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you. Hmm… then let's leave the questioning at that, and begin the actual investigation of the room."

There, Kyouko-san looked at her wristwatch.

The hand of her analog watch signaled it had become six. Meaning until the time limit, we had…

“I’d like to get back by nine, so three hours to go.”

She said.

My thoughts were naïve, it did seem Kyouko-san intended to retire to bed at her usual time… I couldn’t tell how serious she was as she smiled and said.

“Late nights are the enemy of beauty.”

6

As a result of the first investigation carried out by the laboratory members, the room was in a considerably more organized state, but that was only in comparison to its prior chaos, and when looked on objectively, the laboratory was still a mess.

I thought spotting a single SD card within it would be a herculean task for a layman's eye, but Kyouko-san,

"When hiding something, people can't help but conceal them where they're easiest to find."

Went into investigative work with a good grasp of the concept… ignoring all the places we searched with scrupulous care, she went for the places we would never think of, for example, within the pages of the books lining the shelves, under the computer keyboards, she searched through those sorts of places.

As expected of a professional, everyone present held the honest impression, but looking at it the other way, if what we carried out was a lost item search, then what Kyouko-san was searching for was something intentionally concealed. Her work was closer to a treasure hunt.

It seems after hearing out everyone's stories, rather than a careless misplacement, she was placing more weight on the possibility someone hid it with malice aforethought… or she might possibly have just wanted to eliminate that possibility as quickly as possible.

But after searching so hard, with nothing coming out in a careful body check, this really was somewhat strange- in the time Kyouko-san searched, it grew considerably awkward between the five lab members who couldn't quite help her out.

Right, while it didn't come out in my talk with Kyouko-san, it's not like the possibility lab head Emii orchestrated this farce wasn't non-existent.

Perhaps his work reached a standstill and he was filled with an urge to throw something, or with the data he carelessly lost elsewhere, he made it so he lost it here to escape or distribute responsibility. In that case, no matter how hard we searched the lab, there was no way the SD card would ever come out.

Even someone as incompetent as me knows the devil's proof: it's easy to prove what's there, it's difficult to prove what isn't. Even if the SD card isn't found in this room, that's no proof the card isn't in this room.

"It can't be that Emii-san only ever uses a single SD Card, right? Is it possible it got mixed in with the other cards, or switched out?"

Pulling out a cabinet drawer, Kyouko-san searched not the contents but what was further in the cabinet as she directed the question to no one in particular.

"That much has already been confirmed. I wouldn't make such an elementary mistake."

Lab head Emii gave a disheartened answer.

It seems he really wasn't pleased with an outsider investigating around the laboratory you could call his own domain.

"Is that so. But just in case, everyone else should look through all the SD cards they use. If it's the research data itself, it's best I don't go touching it."

Certainly, SD cards were bought in bulk as consumable items, they couldn't be distinguished by appearance. While labels were stuck on them and symbols were drawn on the cases, if anyone was up to it, I'm sure there are innumerable means to fabricate it.

You could call it a blind spot if you wanted to.

“Ah, b-but… if the backup data’s slipped been mixed up with the SD cards someone has on hand, would that make that person the culprit?”

Gifube-san asked anxiously.

“No, there’s no guarantee. It’s possible the culprit just slipped it in as a temporary hiding spot. If you want to hide a tree, do it in the forest as the old saying goes.”

To hide an SD card, hide it among SD cards?

That may be true. A backup containing important research is one thing, but the treatment of other storage media, in this workplace its quite often they’re arbitrarily handled as consumable items. Perhaps inevitable.

To mix it up among them, I see, that is a good way to hide it… I haven’t been granted a PC in this facility, so naturally, I don’t have any SD cards on hand, so the most I could do was brew a refill of coffee for everyone, but the others began moving in accordance with Kyouko-san’s orders.

Of course, that didn’t mean everyone was checking their own files, it went that a single card was checked over by the other three.

A daring hiding place.

Indeed a detective’s viewpoint, or rather, if I was the culprit, it was the sort of idea that might get me around to thinking ‘I should’ve just done that’. But looking at the result, even after checking through all the SD cards presented, the backup data wasn’t found.

Perhaps the file names had simply been changed, Honda-san pointed out, so they went out of their way to open each and every file and check through it, but they were all in the clear… in exchange for all the time wasted, nothing was gained.

“We don’t need to go as far as to look through the brand-new cards still in their packaging, right?”

As assistant head Yurine said that with a slightly cynical tone, Kyouko-san spoke not particularly discouraged.

“Yes, that should be fine.”

She replied.

Bold, or perhaps brazen if you wished to speak ill. Someone might take it as arrogance, but it was a steadfast attitude… well, to Kyouko-san who’ll forget about everyone by tomorrow, perhaps she simply isn’t scared of being hated by anyone.

“I’ve just finished my search as well.”

“Eh? By which you mean…”

Lab head Emii leaned himself forward.

“I’ve taken a look through everything, but I haven’t found the SD card you’re looking for.”

Kyouko-san reported.

By that time, it was already seven in the evening.

The time limit Kyouko-san thought up would come in two hours… even if she said late nights were the enemy of beauty, this was the girl who stayed up three nights straight to solve the ‘Kite Chain Murder Case’. Even if that was the exception, say the case continues going through stormy waters, I’d like to believe she’ll at least stay awake until tomorrow morning, but…

“Oy, oy, just what was the point of this time? This farce? Are you really a famous detective?”

Honda-san drew closer as if to start something but she smoothly avoided- simply ignored- him as she approached me.

Of course, it did not seem she thought to be protected by me,
“Kakushidate-san, can I have a short meeting with you?” she invited me into the hall.

7

“I’ve roughly deduced the location of the backup data. But where we are now, it is impossible to logically identify the culprit.”

After receiving an even more scrupulous body-check from lab head Emii and Honda-san, I left the room once more and headed to the small meeting room with Kyouko-san, but as soon as I took my seat she started into it.

She said it so simply I thought I might have misheard…

“Eh? So you did it? But didn’t you just say you didn’t find–”

“It’s true that I didn’t find it. Rather, it’s because I didn’t find it that I have a general idea of where it must be. But I don’t know the culprit.”

“Culprit… which means this time’s loss really was an offense brought by someone’s ill intent?”

“Yes, so it seems. Well, I won’t say it’s absolute… but it’s still unknown who did it.”

Quite anxious over not knowing the culprit, Kyouko-san spoke quite apologetically… but from my point of view, just knowing the whereabouts of the backup data was plenty reason to rejoice.

“That isn’t the case. The request I undertook was to wash away the dishonor done by the suspicion placed on you, Kakushidate-san. The way things are going, I won’t be able to.”

“What do you mean by that? If you’ve found the data, then–”

“Not knowing who the culprit is means, just like the other four, it is possible for you to be the culprit.”

“.....”

“Rather, more so, the situation will only worsen. When it could have just been a careless blunder... as you said, to this point that possibility was highest, but from the hiding place I can deduce, all I can prove is that someone did it intentionally.”

That’s... definitely not good.

It’s definitely not good for me, but it’s also terrible for the laboratory as a whole... finding the data will only leave the root of the problem that, ‘someone did it but we don’t know who’.

I wouldn’t want to borrow lab head Emii’s words, but in such a discomforting situation, there’s no way they could do any proper work.

“And so, I need some more details from you. I need you to tell me about the human relations within the laboratory.”

“From me? ... You mean from everyone, don’t you? I’m just the first one you called in.”

“No, from here on out, I shall be placing my hopes on you. I have decided to trust you.”

On those words I noticed.

Come to think of it, in that last body-check when I left the room, Kyouko-san didn’t take part... was that a show of trust towards me?

“D-do you mean you’re trusting your client?”

“Clients tell lies. I generally work under that one-sided assumption. But in our exchanges up to now, I have determined you are an honest, steady person incapable of telling a lie.”

I’m rarely ever told something like that.

Rather, my life’s been nothing but hearing the opposite… I’ve lived on even doubted by my parents. I can easily count the number of times someone’s said they trust me.

Sadly, no, should I be happy? Almost all of those times came from Kyouko-san, but… no matter how much she trusts me, by the next time we meet, she’ll have forgotten. As long as it isn’t an incident like this one, the reason I don’t call Kyouko-san to put in a request is simply because it’s much too painful.

But as I thought, being trusted by something is something to be happy about.

“And so, Kakushidate-san. From your observations, it doesn’t matter how detailed, no, make it as detailed as you can, in the episodes you’ve seen up to now, please tell me about the personality, nature, personal history, and family relations of lab head Emii Kouro, assistant head Yurine Yuuko, researcher Honda Eichi and researcher Gifube Nagame.”

Disregarding my mental state practically moved to tears, Kyouko-san went on crisply… she didn’t seem to mind her bedtime, I’m sure she thought staying away from the room with me too long would make the culprit suspicious.

“I think I’ll try probing for a motive… for example, is there anyone with financial circumstance? With relatives? With acquaintances in the same trade… perhaps?”

“Hmm… nothing’s coming to mind.”

Even if she places her expectations on me, a new hire like me has yet to break the ice with any of them. I've only eaten out with them a few times. If it's about the games or manga they like, then I know a bit, but I highly doubt the titles Honda-san and Gifube-san like hold any relevance to this case.

"No… that sort of… info that looks irrelevant at a glance… can prove surpri… singly…"

And then.

By the time I noticed, it was too late.

Just that abruptly, the eyes beyond Kyouko-san's glasses had gone drowsy… her blinks became unnaturally numerous. Her head that had started nodding form who knows when was supported up by the elbow she placed against the table.

"Impor… tant."

"Kyo… Kyouko-san! You can't!"

I didn't make it in time.

By the time I pushed back my chair to stand and reached a hand to shake her shoulders, she broke down and fell prostrate on the desk with good momentum. Her head received a hearty blow, a considerable sound resounding through the small conference room, but after that, she showed not a twitch… I soon heard a gentle sleeper's breath.

"Ah…"

I fell into despair as I moved across the narrow room, grasping Kyouko-san's arms from the outside and lifting her body… she hit her head so strongly I was worried, but it seems only her forehead made contact and her glasses weren't broken.

Still, she was soundly… asleep.

She was peacefully sleeping.

This can't be, it's much too fast.

It wasn't even eight yet… I thought as- a bit late- I shook Kyouko-san's body.

"Mn…"

It didn't seem to be that deep of a sleep, as I shook her she faintly opened her eyelids.

And the first thing to come out of her mouth.

With the complete eyes of one looking at a stranger.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Who are you? Where is this?"

8

I instantly removed my hands from her.

I couldn't bear the thought of her thinking I was trying to assault her in her sleep… as I retreated so far I was stuck to the wall, just how did Kyouko-san see me? Did she think me even more suspicious? For now she simply stared.

"M-my name is Kakushidate Yakusuki… Y-your client and I'm, no I mean, you're at the Sarashina Research Institute."

My tongue was tangled and I couldn't explain at all.

Feeling a shock at the trust I was supposed to have gained being lost so quickly, I was completely stunned.

Kyouko-san shifted her eyes,

"…"

She took her gaze off of me. Her motions were as if to say, 'not worth my time' and abandon me.

It was a terribly sorrowful truth, but at the very least, Kyouko-san had determined on the spot I was harmless enough. But such salvation, when looking at the big picture, was dangerously trivial.

Kyouko-san had already completely lost her memories from up to a moment ago… I can't go as far back as yesterday, but she had completely forgotten everything that happened from when she likely woke up at six in the morning.

The fact I called her for help, the fact she came to this research institute to investigate… and more than anything, her splendid deduction, the whereabouts of the lost SD card.

All the work she had done up to now, all her detective work had been returned to nothingness.

Forget that, Kyouko-san's current mental state was, 'I was supposed to be asleep in my own bed, and yet when I got up, I was in an unfamiliar room with a completely unfamiliar man'… if I was in her position I'd raise a scream of dismay.

But Kyouko-san's face was grim as she entered wary mode, her actions were the epitome of levelheadedness… she instantly rolled up the sleeve of the cardigan and inner shirt she wore.

A slender, white left arm.

All over the forearm, in black, thick magic pen strokes it was written.

'I am Okitegami Kyouko. 25 years old. Head of Okitegami Detective Agency. White hair, wear glasses. Memory resets every day.'

"…"

More clear than a license, it was a self-identification by her own hand… it was her own handwriting, there was no way she would mistake it.

"I am Okitegami Kyouko. 25 years old. Head of Okitegami Detective Agency. White hair, wear glasses. Memory resets every day."

Reading through that passage, Kyouko touched a finger to her glasses and confirmed the color of her hair… she gave a satisfied nod. She overlapped with her personal information.

So in preparation for an unfamiliar situation, Kyouko-san had her own sort of back-up… while I'd sought help from Kyouko-san a number of times, it was the first time I ever learned she was so prepared.

So as not to forget it, an elementary schooler might use the back of their hand as a reminder note, was it a variation of that… when she didn't take any notes and didn't carry a cell phone, there's no way she wouldn't be worried about how to deal with a situation where she didn't fall asleep in her own bedroom, and thinking back on it, there's no way a great detective like her wouldn't have taken countermeasures for the situation I most feared. Was it something of a letter from her departed past self… as I admired it, Kyouko-san swiftly moved to her next action.

Perhaps her thought process went as follows.

My memories are inconsistent… but if it was me, wouldn't I have done something in preparation for this situation? For example, leaving a message on my left arm for future me.

And seeing how the information aligned with her expectations, she thought this… if it's true I'm an individual whose memory resets every day, this can't be the only message I left behind.

With her right hand, Kyouko-san pinched the left side of her long skirt that went down to her ankles, boldly pulling it up… to where I could just barely not see her undergarments.

There, written in the same pen as on her left arm it was written.

'Currently on the job'

"Currently on the job"

She repeated.

As if to reinput the data.

I heard the skirt fall to its normal position, I turned from the wall back to Kyouko-san… whatever the case, I thought I had to say something, but by that time, Kyouko-san had already silently taken her next action.

It was yet another artistically bold move, and I was on the verge of averting my eyes, but I failed. Lifting up her outer garment, on her exposed abdomen, in a fine red pen different than the one used for the previous portions, it was written.

‘Kakushidate Yakusuke-san. Height over 190cm. 25 years old. Client. Ask for specifics. You can trust him’

“Kakushidate Yakusuke-san. Height over 190cm. 25 years old. Client. Ask for specifics. You can trust him”

You can trust him.

She read over only that portion twice… before Kyouko-san turned to me.

And she spoke.

“My apologies, Kakushidate-san.”

Standing from her chair, she quickly lowered her head… while she still seemed uncomfortable, from that attitude, her wariness had faded.

“Can you please tell me the situation?”

8

The message on her left arm was one she probably constantly renewed, the message on her left leg had to be written when she received my request and left her office… and the words on her stomach had to be written sometime on the job.

While the empty-handed Kyouko-san didn't take notes, she could at least find a pen in the laboratory… does this mean she measured out the right time to write it in preparation for the million to one chance?

After that, before hearing me out, Kyouko-san checked all over her body, but it did seem the messages from the departed, or from her past self… those dying message-like vanishing notes ended with those three.

Meaning she determined it would be fine just to hear the specifics from me- even if that was something that made me quite happy, even if I was unpopular enough to cry, unfortunately, I had still yet to hear the SD card location Kyouko-san deduced. If this was how it was going to be, I should've asked that before anything else.

All I could explain was the situation leading to her present state, meaning her deductions had returned to nil. I had to explain to Kyouko-san 'all her work had been for nothing'.

"Don't worry about it, this isn't your fault. It's the fault of my own inattention."

Said Kyouko-san… but did she say inattention?

Sure enough, she did fall asleep on the job, but I thought it a bit off to express that as inattention. Right, perhaps Kyouko-san simply didn't tell me, but had pulled an all nightery the previous night… perhaps that's why she slept there?

“No, I don’t think I’d be the sort to accept new work in a sleep-deprived state. If you want to request for someone in an incomplete state, I can introduce you to a trustworthy person in my trade. I was most likely drugged.”

Kyouko-san declared it and asked me.

“Kakushidate-san. Did I consume anything while on the job?”

“… No, nothing but a spot of instant coffee.”

“Then that has to be it.”

Kyouko-san gave a satisfied nod.

“I think I left this message fearing violence in a situation where the culprit is nearby.”

Said Kyouko-san with a lift of her shirt. Seeing me avert my eyes, “My apologies,” she immediately returned it.

“But to be put to sleep… it seems one of those four knows about me well. The fact that putting me to sleep renders me helpless.”

“No, until I explained, no one seemed to know about you.”

“Then it may have been a quick wit at work… but it’s possible to play the fool. By your word, Honda-san teased, ‘Are you really a famous detective?’… if that were to come from someone who didn’t know me at all, that line feels a tad unnatural.”

She did have a point.

Then Honda-san knew about Kyouko-san? No, while I was in this meeting room, it’s possible a separate someone told him about it.

Even if the laboratory is cut off from the net, we live in an information society; it wouldn't be strange if one, or even all of them knew about the extraordinary oddball known as the forgetful detective…

While it might have slipped their mind, they might have remembered when they saw her in person… that being put to sleep was her greatest weakness.

As a matter of fact, even just in the Okitegami Kyouko's adventures I'm aware of, there were countless occasions where the culprit used all sorts of means to put her to sleep. In Kyouko-san's case, when someone wanted to seal her mouth or obstruct her deductions, there was no need to brave the risks involved in killing her… without going so far, all they needed to do was somehow put her to sleep.

Sleeping gas, alcohol, lowered oxygen levels, anesthesia, soothing musing, a comfortable massage, in that one idiotic place, they even tried hypnosis.

In this case, a sleeping drug?

I'm the one who brewed the coffee, if they smeared a drug in the cup for visitor use… but a sleeping drug wasn't something that could be prepared so conveniently.

"There are various drugs that can put you to sleep. Cold medicines and anxiety pills could be called sleeping pills if the need were to arise. Taking them makes you sleepy. I probably rarely take that sort of medicine, so I think the effects would be higher than usual."

And if she (probably) rarely took them, she wouldn't be able to identify it if it were to be mixed in… I'm dubious whether or not Kyouko-san even remembers the 'right taste' of coffee.

"If it's cold medicine, there may have been some in the room."

I get the feeling I saw some in our first search. An over the counter sort… meaning anyone could use it, and it would be difficult to pinpoint the culprit through that.

Dammit. Which means we're back to stage one.

No, not even at stage one- Kyouko-san deduced the hiding place of the SD card from hearing out everyone's take, and taking honest time and effort searching the room with her own hands and eyes.

But if she said she wanted to do the same thing once more, those four wouldn't agree. When it came to the search of the room, Kyouko-san personally said she, "didn't find anything"… if she said she wanted to do it again from the start, they'd grow fed up of putting up with her.

"It's not stage one, Kakushidate-san. At the very least, at present, the fact that the culprit is among those four is certain. A certain someone who found it inconvenient if I wasn't put to sleep."

"T-that's definitely true, but…"

Even after her memories were reset, I was happy that Kyouko continued on under the assumption I wasn't the culprit, but if that's all the information we had, it would be difficult to advance. Having to redo the investigation was fatal.

"No, Kakushidate-san. There is no need to redo the investigation. If you're talking about fatal, then the culprit did make one fatal mistake."

"Eh?"

"When it comes to mysteries, laying hands on the detective is against the rules. If they plan to break the rules, then I shall have to do the same."

Kyouko-san said with a gentle smile.

But her eyes weren't laughing in the slightest.

"Since I'm going to lose it anyway, they thought so light of messing with my memories. The culprit shall definitely receive their comeuppance. Let us return, Kakushidate-san. It will only take a second to clear the suspicions surrounding you and resolve this incident."

The fastest detective showed her mettle.

And right after that, now please lead me to the laboratory, she said... she didn't know where it was. That wasn't all, she didn't remember the faces of lab head Emii or vice head Yurine, researcher Honda or researcher Gifube.

Yet regardless, she said she would resolve it in a second... normally I would take it as a bluff, but as I'd been saved countless times by Kyouko-san, I knew it was just the plain truth.

On the contrary, didn't they know?

Whoever they are, the culprits that put Kyouko to sleep, don't they ever learn that while being her weakness, it's what invites in her imperial wrath? There hasn't been a single culprit who hasn't been arrested after forcefully putting Okitegami Kyouko to sleep...

10

Eight in the afternoon.

“Thank you for waiting, let’s get to solving this.”

Kyouko-san said with an innocent look. It was an attitude that didn’t give anyone the sense she had lost all memory she had up to a moment ago… I had told her everyone name and features beforehand, so perhaps she knew who was who in the room, but even so, this was cold.

It was suspenseful to watch.

The culprit who drugged her’s heart must be racing as they wondered if the medicine didn’t work… as a retort against a detective novel’s promised, ‘gathering everyone together to say the conclusion,’ I get the feeling I’d definitely never take part in such a gathering if I really was the culprit, but as all involved parties were confined in one room, the culprit had no choice but to attend. Kyouko-san told me to suppress them if the culprit grew overly rowdy… it seems that upon receiving that message from ‘Yesterday’s Kyouko-san’, ‘Today’s Kyouko-san’ had a tendency to trust me too much. It was an honor, but I’m not as accustomed to fighting as my appearance might suggest, so I don’t know if I can manage… that being the case, there was no way I could decline.

So it didn’t matter who she said the culprit was, I paid mind to everyone.

“Solving… which means you know who the thief is?”

“Is there a culprit among us?”

“More importantly, where’s the SD card? We have to find it.”

“… I’d like to go home sometime soon.”

Lab head Emii, assistant head Yurine, Honda-san and Gifube-san all spoke in turn… They all seemed half in doubt, but judging by their reactions, I doubt anyone would think Kyouko-san had yet to identify the culprit and that she'd forgotten the hiding place of the SD card.

"This might be a place to study stereopsis, but… in the end, humans only see what they want to see."

Saying such a suggestive thing (the knowledge on stereopsis had already left her head), Kyouko-san paced through the room… she had the five of us- me included- sit, and loitered as if to pass between us.

Everyone turned their necks to follow her, but as if to evade their stares, she drew a soft path as her feet stopped where no one expected.

It was before the desk of lab head Emii from where the SD card disappeared… or not, beside the computer of assistant head Yurine who knew him longest… or not, behind the seat of Honda-san who didn't get along with him… or not, to the side of the locker belonging to Gifube-san, the only one who stuck up for me… or not.

It was before a hot water dispenser placed over a low bookshelf by the window. There were cups and other assorted things placed around, it was a spot to brew instant coffee or tea. I had used it a moment ago… the drugged coffee Kyouko-san drank was brewed there.

Was she going to go at it from that angle? I just didn't notice it, but there was only one person who could've laced the coffee? But revealing that would be a double-edged sword- meaning Kyouko-san would have to reveal the fact she lost her memories to the wide open world. Who would ever trust a detective who loses their memories in the middle of an investigation?

But contrary to my worries, Kyouko-san calmly took the hot water pot in hand, holding it as if embracing it to her chest.

“As standard procedure, before I reveal the culprit’s name, I’ll start with the important facts. I’d like to make clear the whereabouts of the SD card.”

She said.

“The truth is, when I searched the room and said I didn’t find it, that was a lie. Truth be told, at that point I already knew where it was- what’s more, I confirmed it with my own eyes.”

Confirmed it with those eyes?

No way.

What sort of lie is that?

I don’t think she even identified its location with one hundred percent accuracy, and those memories are currently gone… what’s more, there’s no way she could have seen it.

“And is the data safe?”

Oblivious of that… or perhaps putting on a performance… lab head Emii spoke, and to his words, Kyouko-san shook her head.

“In the sense of it being leaked outside, it’s safe, but unfortunately, the backup data itself wasn’t so fortunate. The reason being…”

Her gaze dropped to the pot in her hands.

“At present, the SD card you are looking for is inside this pot… in hot boiling water.”

“Eeh!?” “Eeh!?” “Eeh!?” “Eeh!?” “Eeh!?”

At the moment everyone raised a voice of surprise at Kyouko-san's sudden declaration,

"Don't move!!"

Said she.

In a loud voice that might shatter glass, Kyouko-san's yell rang through the room… from her small build, just where did that volume come from? At that thunderous clamor like the pulling of a security buzzer, everyone stiffened.

At this point, lab head Emii's wails were cute in comparison… no more than the warble of a small bird. In contrast, Kyouko-san's loud voice held an intensity that cut through the air.

As if slathered with wax, no one could take a move… let alone cower, with everyone practically playing dead, Kyouko-san pointed at everyone one by one before confirming it.

"Yep, you're the culprit."

She said in a gentle voice with a smile.

Me included, four had been frozen with their eyes locked on what we had been looking at just before she yelled out, the hot water dispenser she held in her hands… but only one, the final person Kyouko-san pointed at, Gifube Nagame-san alone had frozen up with her eye directed at the drawer of her own desk.

11

Only one person looked in a different direction… why that would make Gifube-san the culprit, pitiful as it may be, I was unable to work it out on the spot. But as if it had finished its purpose, Kyouko-san returned the pot to its original location, immediately moving herself along Gifube-san's line of sight, and just as she was pulling out the drawer, I came to a late realization.

The other four looked at the pot where Kyouko-san said the SD card was 'there'… naturally. If what you're looking for is 'there', it will reflexively draw your attention.

But Gifube alone reflexively looked in a different direction. This was because she knew the SD card 'wasn't there' in the hot water dispenser Kyouko-san held. Then that pot held no meaning, Kyouko-san simply had to point to a surprising place no one would think about.

It's one of the few answers to the devil's proof.

To prove that something 'isn't there', you simply have to prove it's 'there' somewhere else… and as Gifube-san alone knew it was 'there' elsewhere, she didn't direct her eyes towards the water pot

That wasn't all.

She couldn't help but have to confirm its safety.

It went without saying, if she planned to take out the data in the end, it would be no joke the million to one chance it was put into boiling water.

So she couldn't help it.

She couldn't help but confirm the place she had concealed it… that only she knew about, the SD card's hiding place.

"Normally, I forbid myself from tripping a culprit up in such a trap… but you were the one to use a forbidden move first, Gifube-san. I hope you don't take this the wrong way."

As she said that, Kyouko-san confirmed the contents of the drawer… Gifube-san didn't move an inch. Her shoulders dropped in resignation. Her attitude was an elegant confession.

It really was one second.

Rather, one breath.

Okitegame Kyouko had resolved the incident.

I was supposed to contain the culprit if they made a mess, but there didn't seem to be the need… the three apart from me seemed to gradually understand the situation, but even when released from the shackles of Kyouko-san's scream, they were all dazed out without any even trying to stand.

"Which means it'll be around here. The point that caught my eye before I lost my memory."

As she said that, what Kyouko-san pulled out of Gifube-san's drawer truly was an SD card… but it wasn't the one that contained backup data on lab head Emii's research, it should've been one Gifube-san kept for personal use.

Everyone had confirmed it.

Come to think of it, I hadn't explained that part to Kyouko-san yet, so,

"Kyouko-san, that's not it. The SD card we're looking for is…"

I was about to say, but,

“You’re right. It might not be this one. It might be this one. Or this one. Or even this one.”

Kyouko-san produced one SD card after another from the drawer. They were all ones Gifube-san had for personal use, properly kept and filed… they should all contain something different than what was on the backup. Or was there an oversight in our check?

“If you want to hide a tree, do it in the forest, as the old saying goes. There’s no way I can tell which one it is…”

If you want to hide a tree, do it in the forest. Kyouko-san said the same thing as before she lost her memories… in that regards, she was the same person, so perhaps that was just a common train of thought.

But we were supposed to have rejected that theory back then… even if she’s forgotten it… no wait, even back then, Kyouko-san didn’t plainly deny it, did she?

“W-what do you mean by that?”

Lab head Emii finally posed the question. Under the influence of that yell from the before, he had completely lost his fangs… you could say he had withered. Though I never thought he’d try to contest that loud voice with his own…

“As I was saying,”

Kyouko-san played with the few SD cards in her hand as she spoke.

“By deleting the backup data on the card and overwriting it with something else, it can be falsified, can’t it?”

“Ah…”

Assistant head Yurine leaked a voice and covered her mouth. It seems the idea had been too simple for anyone to hit upon- I felt the same, but still.

“B-but in that case, it might not come to light, but the data will be gone, won’t it? Would Gifube be alright with that? For simple harassment…”

Not in the interrogative manner he had displayed before, simply as a question, he asked Kyouko-san.

In my talk with (pre-memory loss) Kyouko-san, we had determined it was most likely not a harassment directed at lab head Emii; what’s more, if the data was deleted, or she heard the data was ruined in boiling water, there would be no need for her to intentionally check it. Kyouko-san’s actions were losing their consistency… no, Kyouko-san being inconstant was only natural, I mean her memories didn’t link up.

The problem was the point that the culprit Gifube-san’s actions lacked consistency… if she feared the data would be erased, there was no way she’d have erased it beforehand.

Then…

“I simplified it to make it easier to explain, but in reality, the process should have been reversed. To be more precise, after adding different data onto the SD card, you deleted the backup data.”

So Kyouko-san said, but what would that change? Even if the order was reversed, did that change the fact the backup data was reversed?

“… A data restoration software, eh.”

“Yes.”

At lab head Emi’s powerless words, Kyouko-san nodded with a smile.

“If you use the dedicated software, deleted digital can be restored, in this day and age, everyone knows that. I mean, even I know it. But it’s a surprising blind spot, isn’t it? Even if an SD card looks empty, the traces of the data still properly remain… unless you overwrite the corresponding memory space afterward, it won’t completely disappear.”

So that’s why rather than erasing the backup data, adding the disguise files came first… if it was just once, then it might be possible to restore after one overwrite, but thinking of how valuable the data was, she was hoping for a complete restoration.

Meaning Gifube-san saw her chance, swiped the SD card from lab head Emii’s desk, and went through the steps on her own computer… she stored some camouflage files and erased the backup data.

After that, without anything out of the ordinary… she’d take the SD card that had lost anything out of the ordinary home and use the designated software to restore the data. Not fearing anyone’s eyes, she could give a wave of both hands and take it anywhere, the revival of the stereopsis research data.

Revival.

It really was a power move akin to bringing back the dead… if she succeeded, it would be a simple and smart way to do it.

If she succeeded, that is…

“… From when did you think I was suspicious?”

Weakly, Gifube-san asked Kyouko-san… that was also the standard line from the culprit, but unable to say, ‘No, up to that very moment, I never suspected you,’ the famed detective simply answered with a silent smile.

“Humans only see what they want to see… so that’s what you meant?”

To that, Kyouko-san gave an indifferent response of, “I was just making things up as I went along. There was no meaning to it.”

“You’d best learn from this and not put me to sleep again. Unlike the data you’ve erased, once my memory is gone, it will never come back again.”

12

Once the culprit's been identified, the motive doesn't matter… there are some who think so, but that's not the case for me. Among the detectives I know, there are some stalwart veterans who can say,
'I just have to solve the mystery. I'm not interested in why he killed,' but after being suspected so many times without reason, I can't bring myself to accept the existence of a reasonless crime.

The data Gifube-san carried out, it seems she intended to bring it to a large corporation after all… the 3D technology lab head Emi thought up, when it came to production power and marketability, she thought that elsewhere would be able to actualize the concept much faster.

Of course, it seems it wasn't for the money.

Gifube-san had a mother who lived with her, and while she wasn't particularly ill, in the past few years, she had lost almost all the sight in one eye. With one eye gone, a human's sense of distance suffers greatly… they're no longer able to measure depth. Compared to everything, it might be a small problem, but would mean she would no longer be able to view three-dimensional images.

While the research carried out at the lab was headed by lab head Emii, Gifube-san was also proud to be a participating member… she wanted her precious mother to see the result of her work while she was still able.

She took the data- at the rate things were going, it was impossible to know how many years it would take for the Sarashina Research Institute to actualize the concept- in the hopes she could provide it to a larger-scale institution… to be more precise, she would leak it somewhere. The specifics were still on the drawing board, it seems.

A motive like that's just pretty words, she was obviously after the money, there may have been discord with lab head Emii no one knew about…

there were various possibilities I could consider, but I decided to believe the reason Gifube-san spoke of.

Whether it be a performance or not, it's the sole and least thing I can do for the only person who technically stuck up for me.

As the ever-suspected, all I could do was believe… well, as some mischief among friends, this matter wouldn't be made public, instead being resolved internally, but Gifube-san going without saying, the Emii laboratory that caused such a scandal was subject to disciplinary action. Their budget cut, ironically, Gifube-san's conduct put the three-dimensional technology she was involved with into an even more distant future.

No, I can't speak like it's someone else's business.

A budget cut made them lose the leisure to keep an odd-job helper without any technical knowledge on the payroll and in the end, I lost yet another place of employment.

As promised, the payment to Kyouko-san was taken up by the Sarashina Research Institute, so if you wanted to, you could call it my lone salvation, but…

"Thank you for your continued patronage."

Kyouko-san told me… even if she called it continued patronage, she meant it as thoroughly a standard business line. Though I certainly felt I would be under Kyouko-san's care again.

She left at nine on the dot.

With one job over, she left with a refreshed look on her face… by the way, what Gifube-san used really was the cold medicine, but it wasn't the cup, she rigged the entire hot water dispenser. Meaning her included, everyone drank the medicine, but as Kyouko-san was unaccustomed to it, she exhibited an immediate effect.

The situation being as it was, the fact no one noticed the change in taste really was a blunder, but it was precisely because she had looked inside the pot that at that time that Gifube-san knew the SD card wasn't in hot water, causing her to look not at the heater but at the desk. I guess you could interpret it like that. I doubt Kyouko-san thought that far ahead, but I should think it was just deserts after all. Apart from incurring Kyouko-san's wrath, Gifube-san's acts to conceal her deeds dug her grave in other ways as well.

It seems Gifube-san really did have a vague idea of who Kyouko-san was, and Honda-san told me of the various episodes about Kyouko-san as a 'famous person' he heard from her while I was being questioned, apparently… to Gifube-san, by sharing Kyouko-san's 'forgetfulness' with the others, she attempted to blur out the culprit who could have drugged her. It might be a minor detail, but I'll add it on for argument's sake.

"Well then, Kakushidate-san. I pray it doesn't come to this again. If anything happens, don't hesitate to call Okitegami Kyouko of the Okitegami Detective Agency."

"Yes, I'll do just that."

But even if I say that, by the next time we meet, I'll be back to 'Pleasure to meet you'. When I think about it like that, asking her help is too much a weight on my mind, and I really have my doubts whether I'll be 'doing just that' next time I'm in trouble. No, no, perhaps not getting into trouble is truly the best thing of all…

As if interpreting my lip service as it really was,

"You don't have to be shy. I don't think I'll be forgetting about you for a while, Kakushidate-san."

She said. On those words that went a little too far for business talk, my heart went and skipped a beat, but with an innocent face she pointed around her belly button,

“I mean, it looks like I wrote you in permanent marker.”

She went on.

Ah, that so…

It felt like a heartbreaking letdown, but even if it was only for a few days, the fact that she could trust me remained on Kyouko-san’s stomach in her own handwriting made it feel like I had secretly slipped around a strict regulation, a corrupt sort of feel that made my heart race in a different sense. That heart race was…

“Yes, I’ll definitely do so. I won’t forget. When the time comes, I’ll definitely contact you. It’s a pleasure doing business with you.”

I also crossed common courtesy to say it… receiving those words, a full smile floated over Kyouko-san’s face, “Yes, please don’t forget,” she pinched the corners of her long skirt to give a high-class curtsey.

“Likewise, don’t hesitate to knock on my door. If possible, do please bring a case hard enough to wake me up from this.”

(Pleasure to Meet you, Kyouko-san– Case Forgotten)

Chapter 2:

Let me Introduce Myself, Kyouko-san

1

"I have taken custody of your one million yen. If you ever want to see it again, prepare a hundred million yen."

If you ever receive a phone call like that, you'd surely think it was a prank call rather than a threat. It goes without saying there's no way such an unfair trade could ever be established. One hundred million yen naturally holds one hundred times the value of one million yen, and no matter what inflation or deflation is to come, that relation will never be overturned. Each person has their own way of thinking about money and for every person who laughs off one yen, there's another who'll shed tears for it. For every person who thinks one million yen a fortune, there's surely another who sees it as a paltry sum… but no matter what wild, fantastic train of thought ones hitches a ride on, there should be no human in the world who would see one million yen as more valuable than one hundred million yen. Just who in the world would ever pay one hundred million yen to reclaim a million yen?

And yet, unable to hang up on the prank call that came in, 'she' took it at complete face value and tried to pay the asking price of one hundred million yen. The fact a person able to move a sum so high left and right truly existed was a shock to me, but while a child's kidnapping is one thing, I couldn't believe there could be a real individual who would answer such an unequal transaction… luckily, the matter was resolved before the mismatched payment could be made, it all ended without issue, but when I think of how that deal truly could have come to fruition, that 'Million Deal' really is a case that sends shivers down my spine. The malice that underlay that bizarre phone threat that could even be taken as a farce, and the irony of the truth that lay beneath the case, even thinking back on it now, it really was the type that makes you quiver. If you'll let me drop my prudence, it's only at times like these that I find myself jealous of Kyouko-san, who can completely forget any case she's involved in, never thinking back on it for an eternity to come.

2

To be completely honest, the call from Kondou-san came right around the time I thought I should meet him again. Even if I say that, I had just been fired from the Sarashina research institute and was in the midst of the difficulties of job hunting… I might call it a silver lining on the dark cloud that I was paid a severance payment far greater than what the short time I worked there was worth. While I considered it hush money for keeping quiet about the scandal, whatever the case, I wouldn't be truly troubled with money for a while to come. Despite that, in my case, I could never be too careless. Someday, quite likely in the near future when I'm dragged into another incident, it would be no joke if my wallet were empty next I was in need of a detective. Among the detectives I know, there's a master who says, 'I don't need a reward; as long as I can solve a captivating mystery, that's all I need,' but occasionally that master is forced to shoulder some exceedingly large problems because of his personality, and meeting him is usually a large expenditure in itself. From the point of view of the petty bourgeois like myself who just want to live a peaceful day by day, a business-like businessman who operates on the simple-to-understand trade of money- the detectives who offer their own deductive prowess as their stock-in-trade- are the ones most desirable for requests.

Therefore, when I had the leisure, I would have to find employment- I was thinking of consulting with Kondou-san before long. As an old hand working for the first rate Sakusousha publishing company, Kondou-san knew his way around. To this point, he's introduced me to my workplaces a number of times.

If you trace it back to the start, Kondou-san was originally my boss when I worked part-time at Sakusousha; I've known him ever since. He was the exception, or rather, the same thing happened as per usual: a bit of an incident in the editorial department (perhaps too large to write off as such) and as always as per usual, the eyes of suspicion fell upon me. The only one to take a stance against the company, the one who advocated for me was Kondou-san.

While everyone doubted me any evidence, Kondou-san trusted me without any evidence… of course, just gaining a single ally wasn't enough to purge the doubts cast on the body, but in the time that Kondou-san bought me, I was able to call in a detective. Looking at the result, I ended up quitting Sakusousha after that, but it was thanks to the detective that I was able to clear up the suspicion, and that opportunity was thanks to Kondou-san.

Despite that, Kondou-san seemed to feel a strong sense of responsibility towards my forced retirement, looking out for me henceforth… with my incident-prone constitution, I can't say I have many friends, however, in my humble opinion, I think I've been able to hold a relationship of equals with Kondou-san that surpasses age and station. To answer the man's chivalrous spirit, I wanted to quickly lay my feet on the earth, I needed to furnish this body with a stable lifestyle… but, as a truth would have it, my state of affairs is as you are aware.

I didn't want to expose the disgrace so I had yet to tell him, but it's possible my firing from the Sarashina Research Institute reached Kondou-san's ears by some other means… and that's why he took the first step to contact me.

But the tone I felt from across the phone wasn't the sort to pep me up by inviting me out for a drink- our promised meeting was at a café at noon, and as I sat across from him for the first in some time, he looked a bit exhausted. I knew the work of an editor was severe but regardless of that, he's usually energetic enough, or so was my image of Kondou-san.

"I'm sorry for calling you out all of a sudden, Yakusuke. Today I came for you to laugh at this pitiful man who has no choice but to cling to our friendship."

Kondou-san started out. His somewhat theatrical tone was the same as ever, giving me a bit of relief, but the contents he spoke at were nowhere near ordinary. From what I can remember, there hasn't been a single instance where Kondou-san has relied on me. Forget that, even now, up to a moment ago, I even thought I would have him help me find a job. He

made it sound like the complete reverse. So while I grew worried, it also made me a bit happy.

“Good grief, you really have it all sorted out, Kondou-san. Not only have you offered me so much of your help, you’ve even properly created an opportunity for me to return the favor. Tell me what you need, I’ll do as much as I can.”

“Thank you. It’s satisfying just to hear you say that, enough I might just call it a day now, but that’s not going to work. I really am troubled. You could even say I don’t know what’s going on. So Yakusuke, I want to borrow your wisdom.”

“My wisdom? If you’re fine with what I’ve got, then sure, but is that going to be of any use at all?”

“Let’s call it your experience. You’re not normal, er, rather, you’ve experienced numerous bizarre incidents, haven’t you?”

“Yes. That’s one of the few things I can brag about. Though I’m not proud of it at all.”

“No, today alone, you can brag all you want. By all means, tell the tales of your exploits. This all comes down to the incident I’m confronting at this moment… I’m not sure if you could call it an incident, but there’s a happening troubling me, and it’s equipped with an eccentricity that won’t fall short. If you’ve anything similar to speak of, I’d quite like to hear all you’ve got.”

Hmm, I nodded. I wanted to become Kondou-san’s power from the depths of my heart- as a practical problem I was worried whether I could do it or not, whether my power was up to par, but if that’s how it was going to be, there might be something I’m capable of.

“I told you before about how I’m stationed in the manga editorial department, right?”

“Yeah, I heard. I’ll never forget anything you’ve told me.”

But ‘stationed’ was a somewhat humble way to put it, and ‘directing’ would be more accurate… Kondou-san’s current title was editor-in-chief of a manga magazine that showed leading sales figures in all of Japan. Even for someone who doesn’t really read manga like me, there’s no way I could comprehend how amazing it was to reach such a position while still in his thirties.

“But Kondou-san, if you’re worried a manga artist isn’t turning in manuscripts by the deadline, I don’t think I can help you. Unfortunately, I’m not one to live by the clock either. I was always chased around by the shadow of summer break homework- that one alone wasn’t a false accusation.”

“I won’t say I don’t have those sorts of troubles, but that’s within the scope of my official duties. Yakusuke, do you know the manga artist called Satoi Aritsugu?”

“Satoi Aritsugu. I think I’ve at least heard the name.”

Even if I said that, I wasn’t hitting on anything certain. Sensing that, Kondou-san offered an explanation.

“One of the poster authors of our magazine. A so-called best seller… while I say our magazine, in this day and age, even if you look at the industry as a whole, there aren’t too many authors whose comic sales can reach figures in the millions per issue.”

“Really? I often hear the advertisement ‘Over a million sold’ on everything.”

“That’s because people don’t go out of their way to stick an ‘over a million sold’ seal on just everything. The fact you hear it so often is just how powerful it is as a sales pitch.”

“Hmm, I see. It’s because it’s rare that I see it everywhere… how deep. Then if you tell me the title of his work, I might know it.”

But even as I said that, the title of the work Kondou-san told me didn’t ring any bells either. Clueless to the end am I… is it only natural that I don’t pass my interviews?

“All you have to understand is that they’re the gem of the industry. Even if I add a -sensei to their name, they’re still in their early twenties, younger than you.”

“I see… the fact they’re a gem at that age must be something. A so-called genius, eh?”

“All manga artists are geniuses.”

Kondou-san said naturally as if it was the simple truth.

“Of all else, they’re the people who’ve had their childhood dreams come true. There aren’t any people who compromise and become manga artists because they can’t help it… they truly become the person they wanted to be. Even for me, when I turned in the entry sheet for Sakusousha, it’s not like I thought I wanted to be an editor by any means.”

“Sure enough… that sort of occupation might be surprisingly rare.”

It might not be a definite rule, but actually becoming something in the list of top 10 things elementary schoolers want to grow up to be must happen at a considerably low probability. Far from it, I can’t even keep a job I don’t want for long.

“Of course, in the sense they don’t know setbacks, you could say she’s an odd one… having her face such hardship after achieving her dreams would be too cruel a reward. Adjusting their world sense in that field is the job of us editors. What I want to consult with you this time, in short, is connected to the industry, but… it all started when Satoi-sensei suffered loss in a robbery.”

“A robbery? They were robbed?”

“I don’t want the fact I brought this to you to be taken as a slight against our friendship… Yakusuke, I beg that you don’t make this consultation public. Manga artistry is a popular business, I’d quite like to avoid a scandal.”

“I know that, of course. Let’s see, a popular manga artist was victim to a burglary, that really would become a top scoop.”

Even if that’s how the world worked, I doubt an author would wish for the world to be astir over something apart from their work.

“So what was stolen? A complete manuscript, or a notebook of ideas…”

Comparing it with the numerous experience, or rather, the various criminals I was made out to be, I tried probing further.

“No, what was stolen was money.”

He said… that answer was a slight letdown. My disappointment was grounded in my sense of curiosity, it seems I was hoping for an incident more scandalous and perhaps I should do some serious soul-searching, but if money was stolen, it didn’t reach the realm of the bizarre, it was a common occurrence in the world. I had no place to comment as an authority on the subject.

“It happened just the other day… Satoi-sensei faced a theft of one million yen.”

“A million yen, hmm.”

Of course, that’s a considerable sum, but as we’d just discussed selling a million volumes, my sense of numbers was out of whack, I had run out of surprise, and I simply ended up nodding. To try following up, I continued on with a question.

“Not just around one million yen, was it exactly a million? Whichever it is, I don’t think that’s the sort of sum that should be left around the house.”

“The crime didn’t occur at her house but her workplace. A bundle of one million yen concealed in her workplace refrigerator was stolen, it seems.”

“Refrigerator… of all places, they had to hide it in the most easy-to-spot location.”

The first place any cat burglar checks for valuables is apparently the refrigerator, I thought that was common sense at this point, but… I see, certainly, a manga artist might not be too knowledgeable on worldly affairs. I’m sure actually keeping money under the mattress would make it harder to find. I won’t go as far as to say they reaped what they sowed, but it was much to crude of a way to handle a sum of one million yen.

“You’re right. In that regard, I also gave her a stern lecture, but… it seems nothing else was stolen after all. Though if that’s all there was to it, I wouldn’t go as far as to plague you, Yakusuke.”

“Which means the story continues,”

“Rather than continue, this is the main part. Honestly, to Satoi-sensei, a million yen is within the range of a minor miscalculation on her forms. If that was all that was taken, I doubt she’d even take it to the police. The opportunity cost of having her time taken up by on-site investigations and having her workplace temporarily unusable would be far higher.”

“… Is manga artist really that lucrative of a business?”

“More than lucrative. If you make it.”

“And if you don’t?”

“Less than lucrative. That aside, before Satoi-sensei noticed the theft, she received a single phone call… directly to her cell phone. The call went as follows. ‘I have taken custody of your one million yen. If you ever want to see it again, prepare a hundred million yen’.”

3

For a moment I thought I misheard. Or perhaps in the talks up to now, I had carelessly failed to pick up on some piece of vital information.

“My apologies, Kondou-san. Can you please say that one more time? It sounded to me like you just said, ‘If you ever want to see your million yen again, prepare a hundred million yen’.”

“I don’t have to repeat it, the reason being that’s exactly what I said. Of all things, the owner of the phone demanded one hundred million yen in exchange for the stolen million. Meaning this is not a case of theft, you can call it a case of abduction and threat… how about that? Now isn’t that strange?”

It truly was. It was so strange I suddenly didn’t know what to say. The monetary sum was so high, perhaps some things weren’t hitting me but even if I scaled down the ration to something I could deal with, that was still demanding a ten-thousand-yen bill in exchange for my hundred yen coin, was it not. Just how would such a transaction be established?

“In that case, rather than the stolen million, the fact someone who sent such a cryptic threat was able to infiltrate Satoi-sensei’s workplace and leave proof seems creepier. Of course, that’s only if we assume the thief and the threatener are the same individual…”

As the person being consulted with, I tried saying something decent to probe out the possibilities. It was imitation deduction. It’s not completely impossible for a different party who knew of the theft to make a prank call in bad taste… but if Satoi-sensei personally didn’t notice the theft until the call came in, it’s a faint line of reasoning.

“I know it’s painful to not be able to use one’s workplace but Kondou-san, I really think you should just contact the police. It’s possible this is the work of a stalker after all… if you want, I can introduce some trustworthy members of our noble police force.”

With my history of suspicion, I did have quite a few acquaintances within the organization. A majority of them treated me as a suspect, so it's hard to say we got along… but it's not like I don't know a few who'd listen.

"No, I appreciate the offer but I can't do that. By which I mean, the threat had a continuation. 'You will transfer one hundred million yen to the account I'm about to spell out. Once I confirm the deposit, the million yen I have taken custody of shall be returned in the mail'… and, 'In the case you contact the police, your million yen will never return to you again'."

"…? No, that's all part of kidnapping 101 but… are you really saying that's why you won't turn to the police?"

"That's right. Looks like you get it, Yakusuke."

"Quit teasing me, Kondou-san. You're making it sound as if you plan on following along with the culprit's underhanded- rather comical- treats. Don't tell me you're going to pay one hundred million yen to regain a million."

"I'm not the one who said it, this is Satoi-sensei we're talking about. And that's precisely it."

Kondou-san spoke with a grim face. From his tone, it didn't seem like he personally accepted that deal.

"Of course, I tried to stop her, but she's an obstinate one. I'll definitely pay it, whether it be a hundred or two hundred million, I'll pay it, no matter what happens, I'll get the stolen million yen back, Satoi-sensei said and wouldn't hear anything else. It's lucky the threat came in late evening when the banks were closed. Otherwise, Satoi-sensei would've ran straight over and made the transfer."

"I see… she sounds like the victim of bank fraud…"

They were words that amazed me, but they didn't seem to be a joke. When it's gone that far, it can't just be written off as a 'manga artist's worldview'... rather than strange, it was crazy.

"Today's Saturday, so she can't make a transfer until the business week starts. But once Monday comes around, no one will be able to stop the torrent... no matter who tries what, Satoi-sensei will transfer one hundred million yen to the designated account."

"That account's probably a fake one... if this sounds like a crude question, please blame my lack of virtue but Kondou-san, is one hundred million yen a small sum for a bestselling manga artist?"

"It's a sum that won't fail to move an author who sells in the millions... in Satoi-sensei's case, the income from mixed media is also something to consider. At the very least, I know she's got accounts with considerable balances spread across various banks. However, no matter the case, I doubt anyone in the world thinks of one hundred million yen as a small sum. Meaning, what was stolen was a million yen with enough value Satoi-sensei would be willing to pay such a sum to regain it. There's no doubt there's some circumstance behind it."

Circumstance. A circumstance that could prioritize one million yen over a hundred million... if it was a gem or a painting, I might be able to see it. Such assets are rare and hard to come by. It's thinkable they might have a value far exceeding their price tag to their owner. The market value doesn't always equal its sentimental value... I'm sure there are people out there who'd pay one hundred million yen for a million-yen ring. Based on the case, it might be something they're willing to offer over two hundred million for. Like a memento from a parent, or a present from a loved one, those sensitive cases are plenty possible.

But whether you lay it up or on its side, a wad of a million yen is just a wad of a million yen... no matter what sense of value one holds from what culture sphere or what upbringing, it's a hundredth of a wad of one hundred million yen, and a hundredth nothing more. This isn't a problem of economics it's a matter of simple arithmetic.

“What did the individual have to say on the matter? Meaning Satoi-sensei personally.”

“Of course, I did ask, and I got an incomprehensible mutter that didn’t constitute an answer. For argument’s sake, it seems there is some reason to it, though it’s ever-changing and definitely not something I can agree with. But after pressing too hard, she told me she was free to do what she wanted with her own money, and I couldn’t say anything too strong about that. I wouldn’t want to blame the victim and make her cry.”

“C-cry?”

She’s not a child, I thought, but Kondou-san’s expression was serious- it may be true a genius who had their dreams come true without setback might not be able to shake off their youth so perhaps that wasn’t an exaggeration.

“That’s why I came to you for help in escaping this predicament, Yakusuke. What pattern can you think of where someone might pay one hundred million yen for one million? In the vortex of trouble you’ve stepped through, were there any incidents of this sort?”

Kondou-san who I was greatly indebted to was finally relying on me, and yet I had no choice to give an ungrateful, disappointing response… meaning I’ve never experienced such a thing, was all I could answer. While I’ve had various allegations cast on me I’ve never been accused of something as crazy as ‘abducting’ one million yen and asking for one hundred million in return.

“I see… well, this is Satoi-sensei’s personal problem so that sounds about right. It’s something only Satoi-sensei will understand. You can’t peer into the head of a genius. I’m sorry, Yakusuke. Asking such a strange thing.”

“Please don’t apologize, Kondou-san. You’re hurting my heart… but if you put it like that, isn’t there at least one person out there apart from Satoi-sensei who does understand the situation?”

“? And who would that be, Yakusuku? I don’t have the slightest idea.”

“Naturally… the abductor, the threatener. The culprit clearly stole the million yen at Satoi-sensei’s workplace upon knowing the situation. That’s why they can demand one hundred million as equivalent exchange.”

And if you look at it from the other way, that sounds like something we can use to narrow down the culprit… but it didn’t seem like Satoi-sensei desired such a thing. To the end, what she wanted was the return of the stolen million yen to her hands. She’s willing to pay one or even two hundred million for it, making it all the more dreadful.

“No, if Satoi-sensei’s fine with it, I wouldn’t mind if we contrived one to two hundred million yen from the editorial department’s budget. Having something like this stagnate Satoi-sensei’s work would be a greater loss to our company and the manga industry as a whole… it has enough qualification to be a necessary expense.”

To write off one hundred million yen of necessary expense, how sturdy. When I think of how much preferential treatment a genius receives, I’m driven by an ungrounded jealousy. Well, there’s no way the culprit would prepare a receipt and it would be realistically difficult to include such a transaction as a necessary expense but when Kondou-san says it, it has a hint of authenticity to it… he’s an old hand who’s made various ‘impossibles’ become reality.

“But Kondou-san, isn’t this all based on a guarantee the million yen will be safely returned at all?”

“Yeah. I paid one hundred million yen, but I never got one million yen back. That’s the most likely future I can anticipate.”

“Right… it’s like falling victim to a double-fold scam. The culprit has no reason to mail the million yen as promised. I can’t think such a faithful fellow would commit a crime in the first place… let alone return it, in the worst case, they might just make their next demand. Fork over an additional hundred million, or so. Your manga artist might be wrung out for eternity…”

“It goes without saying that Satoi-sensei is free to do whatever she wants with the money she worked for and earned, but as an editor, having the readers- the children’s allowance flow towards a criminal isn’t a state of affairs I can welcome.”

“Kondou-san.”

“What is it, Yakusuke. You look like you’ve hit on something. Could it be you remembered something? The sort of incident where one million yen was exchanged for a hundred million?”

“No, no matter how I turn my memory over, I’ve never experienced such an unfathomable incident… but it’s not that I remembered something, there’s something that struck me. Perhaps my humble service really will be of help to you.”

“Just listening to my story like this is already plenty helpful, Yakusuke. Are you saying you can do something more for this pitiful man long out of ideas?”

“If you’re pitiful, then I’ve no choice but to help without question. That aside, this vile threatener only said not to contact the police, right? In that case, Kondou-san,”

Said I.

“… Let me call a detective.”

4

To be perfectly honest, in my consultation with Kondou-san, upon hearing the details of a case that would force anyone into confusion, I did not want to call Kyouko-san. Not because of the bizarreness of the incident, it was none other than the fact that Kondou-san would be her direct client that made up the greatest reason for my reluctance… even from the eyes of a man like me, Kondou-san's a dandy great find, I always end up admiring each motion of his elegant conduct and on top of all that, his personality was one I couldn't see fault in. From the eyes of someone without anything like me, he was brilliant enough to avert my eyes, inside and outside, he was the very picture of a 'good man'. In this case as well, I could tell he wasn't worried about the money, he came to me because he was worried from his heart about the manga artist. You might think of me as an arrogant, petty man but I couldn't deny that I didn't want to introduce such a cool bachelor to Kyouko-san.

But come to think of it, that absurd fear was simply my reading too deep… the reason being, no matter how cool of a bachelor she meets, once Kyouko-san sleeps and wakes, she'll have forgotten all about that charming suitor. Whether it be work-related or not, without carrying over any memories, she starts the next day with a clean slate.

Kyouko-san only had today.

Wonderful meetings and fated encounters, even miraculous coincidences, by the next day they might as well have never happened at all… Just as she doesn't remember me when I've 'met' her more than a few times, no matter how favorable of an impression he imparts on her, Kondou-san will be forgotten by tomorrow morning. And he won't be remembered again.

In that case, this wasn't the time for petty jealousy.

We needed to resolve this before the banks opened on Monday, and to avoid a scandal, we needed to solve this in as much secrecy as possible.

Taking those points into account, from my lines of detectives, I had to nominate Kyouko-san… the fastest detective.

And the forgetful detective. Okitegami Kyouko.

That being the case, on Sunday afternoon, I decided I'd be intruding on the manga artist Satoi Aritsugu's workplace. Naturally, Kondou-san would be in attendance as well. This would be my first opportunity to meet a manga artist and as luck would have it, Satoi-sensei was a woman. When drawing shonen manga, it's apparently quite common for women to take on male-sounding pen names… I guess it just goes to show the number of readers who would look down upon a woman's work isn't insignificant.

"Male authors who draw shojo manga are looked down on even more you know. The world sees her as a male author, so please take care in not disclosing this matter to the public. To your detective as… no, that goes without saying."

"Yeah. She's the forgetful detective, after all."

I said as I offered my greetings to Satoi-sensei. Given my impression from her male-sounding name, I found her to be much smaller than I expected; she looked to be a pleasant woman… rather than woman, a girl. A plain T-Shirt and a baggy cotton skirt, it was hard to tell whether those were her work clothes or loungewear. While she had just entered her twenties, she could pass as a teenage student. She didn't look like the sort of person who could mobilize one hundred million yen.

But I'm sure she was the one who couldn't see me as a reliable man in this sort of situation, she didn't return my greeting, simply sending me a suspicious glare. While I'd like to say it was a look I was used to, it really wasn't something one could grow accustomed to. To flee from those eyes,

"W-what a tidy workplace. My apologies, but I always imagined a manga artist's studio to be more jumbled."

I tried some flattery.

But in all honesty, flattery or not, it was a clean room. Satoi-sensei used one room of an apartment complex as her workplace, but rather than a manga artist's studio, with all the high spec computers lined up, I would think it was the office of some IT corporation.

In olden days, a manga artist's initial investment was small, a paper and ink were enough to persevere. It was called a position where it was easy to take the first step, but if production now required this much equipment, perhaps such notions are a dream of the past… far from it, a beginner would need to get into a mountain of debt. I'm sure this is the 'less than lucrative' Kondou-san was talking about.

"Satoi-sensei does digital submissions after all. It's easier that way for me as well. Where are your assistants today?"

To Kondou-san's question, "I had them take the day off. Right now, the manuscript is the least of my problems," Satoi-sensei gave a short reply in a small voice.

I'm sure the manuscript being of such little importance was an ache to editor-in-chief Kondou-san but as expected of such a dignified man, "I see. Then we'd best resolve this quickly," was all he said. The relationship between editor and manga artist varies case by case, but judging by their exchange, it looked like a broadminded father and a daughter in puberty.

The pubescent daughter noisily spoke.

"And I'm saying… I'll just go to the bank tomorrow. All I did was ask if you'd accompany me at the time and yet… and yet you made such a big deal out of it."

"Don't worry about it. Kakushidate-kun here used to work at Sakusousha and he's the man I place the most trust in. You don't have to worry about any information leaking out."

"I see… but great detective? We're not in a manga or anything."

Those words from a manga artist were a slight to all great detectives, but just as we were discussing such a thing, Kyouko-san made her appearance… I thought the address would be a bit hard to find, but she splendidly arrived at the promised time.

A monotone one-piece dress with a nice silhouette, a thin belt wrapper around her waist. The color of the stole she words over it was red. I learned the reason for the lack of exposed skin in her fashion just the other day- I wonder if there's a map to this address or the meeting time somewhere on her body.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I am the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko."

Said Kyouko-san with a deep bow of her head. She leaned too far forward, and it somewhat looked like she was just bending over.

"Ah… yes. I'm Kondou Fumifusa of the Sakusousha company. I'll be in your care."

Hurriedly standing, Kondou-san took out his business card… I wonder what it is, this wasn't like him. His usual refined conduct felt a little disturbed. Even if he was surprised by Kyouko-san's white hair, he's not supposed to be the sort to drag on a strange first impression.

"Satoi Aritsugu. It's a pleasure."

While she didn't bring a business card, Satoi-sensei's modest greeting seemed the calmer of the two… of course, Satoi-sensei was who she was, and despite what she said, she seemed to show some interest towards an individual in a trade she would rarely come in touch with in her everyday life. Her attitude was clearly different then it was with me… even in the midst of a bizarre incident, that curiosity was as expected a manga artist.

Kyouko-san finished greeting the two and then looked at me… why was she staring at me like that? For a moment I failed to grasp it, but I soon understood. Kyouko-san was waiting for me to introduce myself. Right,

from her eyes, just like Kondou-san and Satoi-sensei, I was a new face. No matter how we meet, it's a first encounter.

"I-I'm the one who called you this morning, Kakushidate Yakusuke. I've been in your care a number of times…"

"Oh, is that so."

Came Kyouko-san's half-hearted reply. The 'been in your care a number of times' part didn't leave any impression… certainly, even if she heard something like that, Kyouko-san could only return an insincere smile. While I often fled from criticism this body didn't remember deserving, if I received gratitude for a debt I didn't remember, I would only be confused.

"Then as time is limited, let's get right to work. Please tell me the specifics."

At our first reunion since Sarashina, naturally she didn't show any particular emotion as she briskly entered detective work… through that lonely feeling, I convinced myself it couldn't be helped. Well, as this wasn't a situation where I was suspected as the culprit, I could sit with Kyouko-san comparatively calmly, so perhaps I should be satisfied with that. It was such a meager happiness to be satisfied with, but… I knew how small my container was.

"Umm…"

Just as everyone had taken a seat, Satoi-sensei nervously spoke up.

"Kondou-san arbitrarily proceeded things on his own but… um, detective. I don't particularly wish to capture the culprit. I simply… want to regain what was stolen…"

It's not like I didn't have my prejudices- picturing a best-selling author as overbearing and selfish- and from how she abided such an incomprehensible threat, I did have some anxieties about Satoi-sensei's character, but her courteous tone towards Kyouko-san made me realize

her sociability was much higher than my own. It seems the way she was half-ignoring me for a while now was largely due to my own nature.

“Don’t worry. I would never do anything running counter to my client’s will. If you wish to regain what was stolen, I shall regain it within the day.”

Of course, Kyouko-san’s calm yet confident statement couldn’t go without the added note.

“And I’ll forget it by tomorrow.”

5

No matter how peculiar the incident's details were, the story itself wasn't so complicated, so the talk ended in no time. While Kondou-san repeated the same story he told me, without interrupting, Kyouko-san intently listened in, responding correctly to the verbal cues provided… I hoped Satoi-sensei might chime in to explain further details, but she remained despondent, her mouth firmly shut throughout the time Kondou-san spoke. I could only wish this time would end soon… but that silent pressure wouldn't get through to Kyouko-san.

For better or worse, she went at her own pace.

"I see, I've grasped the gist of things."

Not particularly surprised at the exorbitant demand of one hundred million yen for one million, Kyouko-san finished listening in and smiled… Even if I had already informed her of the details in my prior phone call, her bearing was baffling.

"Satoi-san."

And there Kyouko-san called out to Satoi-sensei, who'd been maintaining the silence. With a wary posture, "What is it?" she responded.

"Upon receiving the job request from Kakushidate-san, I took the liberty of reading the twelve published volumes of your comic. It was very interesting. I truly couldn't put a single book down, and at the scene where Albred passed away, I shed tears as I flipped the pages. To think that under that emotional battle, such a history mystery would unravel itself, I really felt like I was on the edge of my seat as I read."

"Ah… I-I see. Is that so. Thank you… it's an honor to hear that from a detective…"

Satoi-sensei awkwardly responded. No matter how high her guard was, when she was dealing with a reader, I doubt she could continue to take on such a brusque attitude. Of course, I'm sure that was Kyouko-san's intent in reading it, but as Kyouko-san only ever had today, the Okitegami Detective Agency she headed only took same-day reservations, so I was only able to make the request this morning… It's not like much time had passed since then, and being able to read twelve volumes of manga in that time period is a fearsome show of professional duty. While I was involved since yesterday, I haven't even touched Satoi-sensei's work yet…

"I never knew shonen manga these days have such complicated settings and subplots. It was quite hard to take in at once. That part was also appealing, but I really overlooked it. While this might be a rude thing to say, I'm surprised such a tortuous story doesn't tangle you up."

"W-well, I'm the author after all… if I make a mistake, we wouldn't get anywhere."

Satoi-sensei bashfully shied away. While I wondered what sort of shonen manga from what era Kyouko-san was comparing it to, she spoke with a bright smile.

"If it were me, I would forget it in no time, but do you have an idea book or setting reference?" she asked.

"For argument's sake, I have one, but… I can't quite show it to anyone."

As Kyouko-san leaned her body forward, Satoi-sensei spoke as if to take the high ground… I have to admit, for social courtesy, Kyouko-san was treading in too far. She might strengthen Satoi-sensei's guard that was finally starting to slacken. Kyouko-san needed to find out why Satoi-sensei would trade the one hundred million yen for a million, so I'm sure she was just probing for a handhold to break the ice, but…

"Ahaha. I could never ask something so shameless… by the way, based on the fact I don't see anyone else from the editorial department here, is Kondou-san the one in charge of you?"

“Yes, that’s right. I’ve been looking after her since her debut. I do think it’s about time one of the young’uns takes over, but… she’s a precious artist, and I’d have to choose someone up to the task.”

It didn’t feel particularly unnatural to me, but perhaps this editor-in-chief being directly in charge of an artist was an exceptional case within Sakusousha. No matter how well her work sold, if she got preferential treatment, it wouldn’t be a good example to the other artists. The fact that Kyouko-san seemed to be looking me differently since she came to this workplace (for a first meeting at least) might be because she thought I was the editor in charge of Satoi-sensei… though I really doubt that has anything to do with this case.

“I see, I see. Well then…”

The idle gossip (?) over, Kyouko-san started up.

“I’d like to get some things straight. As I’ve promised, I will do everything in my power to bring a resolution to this incident, but in this case, by what sort of resolution should I be aiming for?”

Why was she asking something so obvious so late in the game? I wanted to ask, but come to think of it, that part was still hazy. Rather, that point was still being contested between Kondou-san and Satoi-sensei… and until that was made clear, Kyouko-san wouldn’t be able to put in an earnest effort.

By a circumstance only known to herself, Satoi-sensei would pay anything to get her million yen back… Kondou-san, did he perhaps want to figure out what that circumstance might be? Additionally, it’s possible he wished the detestable person threatening the author he was charged with to face the judgment of the law.

“Detective. If I can pay money to get my stolen million yen back, then that’s all I can ask for. I do not care who the culprit is.”

As expected, Satoi-sensei said such a thing.

“Certainly, if we can’t rely on the analytic power of the police force, it might be difficult to identify the culprit. I’m not sure if it’s because people often come and go, but I had a brief look-through and I can’t say the security on this studio is very high.”

It seems Kyouko-san confirmed it while listening to Kondou-san’s story… no, from her phrasing, I’m sure she already confirmed the apartment’s outside and perimeter. How shrewd; her work ethic always takes me by surprise.

“But there’s no guarantee the million yen will be returned once you pay the hundred million. The culprit might get full of themself and make a further demand… it seems that is what Kondou-san fears, but what say you, Satoi-san?”

“… We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, detective. Unnecessarily agitating the culprit into having them spend the one million yen is far scarier to me… I’m cowering as we speak. Calling in a detective because they said not to bring in the police sounds like pure sophistry to me.”

“Perhaps. By the way, I’d like to ask for argument’s sake, but did the voice you heard over the phone ring any bells?”

While she kept relatively quiet, the way she criticized the fact we called in a detective made me feel awkward for proposing it, but Kyouko-san nonchalantly changed the subject. Her venom extracted by that brazen attitude, Satoi-sensei as well,

“No. That was a voice I was hearing for the first time. The number was withheld… I don’t have any idea who the culprit could be.”

She answered the question.

“Could you tell me the precise time you received the phone call?”

“Umm, late evening on Friday…”

“My apologies, but could you please give me the precise time from your phone record? The human memory isn’t always so reliable.”

“…”

Thinking her own memory power was in doubt, Satoi-sensei’s mood took a blow, but perhaps unable to bring a memory-related objection to the forgetful detective whose memory reset every day, she sullenly took out her cell phone and handed it to Kyouko-san… her phone was the newest model of smartphone, and I grew a bit worried whether Kyouko-san would be able to operate it with her un-updating memory, but as expected of her adaptability, she operated the touch screen just fine. Well, perhaps this was more of an episode to show the high operability of the modern phone… it didn’t seem to be password-locked; Kyouko-san instantly reached the call log. A majority of the entries read ‘Kondou-san’, but there was one entry from ‘Number Withheld’ that had come in Friday- two days prior- at 18:15.

Seeing that, Kyouko-san seemed to gain some conviction, giving a smile.

“… I-is something strange?”

“My apologies, that smile was uncalled for.”

With those words, Kyouko-san returned the cell phone. And, “Then you don’t mind if the request is to regain the stolen million yen, do you? We’ll keep the necessary expenses within one hundred million, if possible,” she said.

“I don’t care if it takes a billion yen.”

Satoi-sensei said something outrageous… even Kondou-san’s voice grew rough, “Don’t say something so stupid!” he scolded her. Satoi-sensei drew back her body, reflexively returning Kondou-san’s glare… good grief, they really were like parent and child. Though no matter how childish her behavior was, as long as Satoi-sensei was over twenty, she was beyond the age where she could be his daughter…

Kondou-san turned back to Kyouko-san.

“The editorial department shall take up your payment. If you’ll resolve this matter, I don’t mind what expenses you use… is what I’d like to say, but Sakusousha is a single corporation, so I’d like to ask for a realistic figure.”

“Worry not. I only said one hundred million to show it would be cheaper to leave it to me by comparison, and I don’t really think it will cost that much. But necessary expenses and payment to me as a detective are separate articles… so would it be okay for us to change locations and have a discussion?”

“?”

Kondou-san tilted his head. I felt much the same. Expenses being different from payment, well that was expected, but was there really a need to change location? I thought, but now that it had been stated Sakusousha would cover her payment, maybe Kyouko-san thought it was best not to involve Satoi-sensei in those negotiations.

Well, if it’s money she earned, in the end, it really is up to Satoi-sensei how she uses it, but if it’s money the company uses for her sake, it would only become a burden on her mind. Looking at the bigger picture, the company’s money was also a profit born from the sale of her works, but she wasn’t defiant enough to insist such a thing.

“Understood, Okitegami-san. If that’s the case, then… let’s go, Yakusuke.”

And it was there as we briskly left the studio that Satoi-sensei called Kyouko-san to a halt. Just what could she want to say, stopping who was- from her eyes- practically a plague agitating the situation?

“You… you’re not going to ask? Why I’m trying to pay an exorbitant amount to reclaim one million yen?”

“Eh? Oh, I don’t need to ask that.”

Kyouko-san stopped her feet, answering bluntly. With only one day of life, each and every second was a valuable asset to her, so to Kyouko-san, it would be no more than a waste of to go through the wasted effort of asking what Satoi-sensei probably wouldn't tell us anyways… Or so I thought, but the reason Kyouko-san didn't toss over the question was something completely different.

"I mean, the reason is clearer than day. Yes, no matter what anyone says, I also believe that million yen is worth more than one hundred million. I won't do you any harm, please just leave it to this detective."

6

At the very least, we were able to find out that even Satoi-sensei considered a trade of one hundred million for a million to be extraordinary, a relief for both me and Kondou-san, but… as Kyouko-san spoke actually spoke to the contrary, I had no choice but to be shocked.

Unable to pursue the intent of that statement then and there, we left Satoi-sensei behind and changed our base of operations form her studio to a meeting room in the Sakusousha main building. As it was Sunday, the building was bare… whether a corporate office was suited to mystery solving aside, there was no need to clear the area, and it was a definite fit for secret talks.

“Do you often scold Satoi-san like that?”

Right after taking her seat, Kyouko-san said such a thing… Kondou-san seemed somewhat taken aback but, “No, I’m sorry I showed you such a pitiful sight,” he defended himself.

“I just can’t seem to shake off my conceit from being the one to see her through her debut… this is no good at all. I shouldn’t treat a hit artist like she’s a newbie forever.”

“Did you by any chance harshly reprimand Satoi-san for hiding her money in the refrigerator as well?”

“? Yes, well… that was too careless of her… even if I wasn’t in charge of her, I’d have scolded her there. But where are you taking this?”

“No, I just wanted to confirm something.”

Without saying much, Kyouko-san simply drank the coffee put out… Did she want to get the talks of money in order before she moved on to the in-

depth reasoning? It seems he agreed that was sound enough as, “Well then, Okitegami-san,” Kondou-san got right to the point.

“About your payment… of course, given the strange nature of the case we’re discussing, I’m prepared to pay more than the estimate I heard from Kakushidate-kun. It’s just, as you heard before, if you deviate too far from a realistic figure…”

“Oh? Ah, right, a talk about money was just an excuse to get out of there, and I’m fine if you just pay my normal fee. To be perfectly honest, it’s actually the opposite. I’m currently fighting with my conscience about whether or not I can even take money for such a simple and obvious case.”

Kyouko-san interrupted Kondou-san to say such a thing, putting me in a daze… she wasn’t joking. If this mysterious happening was ‘simple and obvious,’ then I’d like to get back all the numerous job payments I’ve made to Kyouko-san in full.

“I don’t remember it so I won’t pay it back.”

She plainly declined. Unexpected from her somewhat lax appearance, Kyouko-san was surprisingly firm with money. But given that, for Kyouko-san to wonder whether she could take money for it… just what could the truth of this case be?

“T-then Sakusousha will be paying your normal fee… in which case, I apologize for hurrying you on, but may I hear how you intend to regain Satoi-sensei’s million yen?”

Kondou-san definitely seemed to hurry… before that, I wanted to ask why Kyouko-san had to make an excuse to get us out of there. Was there a reason it would be bad for Satoi-sensei to be in attendance.

“Yes, I’ll hold nothing back. Satoi-sensei said there was no need to track down the culprit, but as long as there’s no guarantee the million yen will come back after she makes the payment, identifying the perpetrator really is the shortest route to getting her money back.”

“I’m sure that’s the case… but if we can’t take this to the police, it will be difficult to pin the culprit down. You said it yourself, Okitegami-san. Or could that also have been some form of misdirection.”

“It’s true I thought pinning the culprit down would be difficult at the time… but now that we’ve reached this point, there’s no need. I did not want Satoi-sensei to hear my reasoning in regards to that, which is why I had us change locations.”

I didn’t even have to ask for Kyouko-san to answer my doubts… or perhaps she sensed I wanted to ask. As expected of a great detective, she excels in reading the niceties of the human heart… or so I received a deep impression, but her words that followed lacked any such consideration.

“The culprit who stole the million yen, and who made the threatening call is likely one of the assistants Satoi-sensei employs. Please look into it starting from the one who’s worked with her longest. The 18:15 call on her Friday’s phone history… even if they deleted it from their own call log, I doubt they’d go out of their way to make an alibi.”

“… You doubt her assistants? When you say to look into them in order, it just sounds like you’re telling me to try suspecting them one by one.”

Without any preface, Kyouko-san abruptly cut into the ‘reasoning she didn’t want Satoi-sensei to hear’, ushering in a somewhat dubious rebuttal from Kondou-san. He was clearly displeased.

“If that’s your reasoning, I don’t need a professional to tell me that… to raise suspicions among friends? Whenever something happens, just suspecting the person closest is no different than what people do to Kakushidate-kun.”

“Oh?”

Kyouko-san looked at me in mild surprise. I see, ‘today’s Kyouko-san’ doesn’t know about the fact I draw false allegations easily.

“At the very least, I am still a part of the detective industry. I wouldn’t cast suspicion on someone over such shallow reasoning… I have a satisfactory reason to doubt the assistants.”

“In regards to that, I do think it would be impossible to satisfy me on that point.”

Kondou-san wouldn’t unhand his weapon. Well, the fact they’re Satoi-sensei’s assistants would most likely mean they were people Kondou-san introduced to her, so it’s natural for him to see it that way. I couldn’t take Kyouko-san’s side in that one either- as long as there were no traces of a break-in from the outside, it was the natural line of reasoning to doubt people from the workplace, but until any definite evidence came out, such suspicions should be held back.

“In the first place, if one of the assistants was the culprit, she would be able to identify the voice from the phone.”

“Yes, that’s also one of the hints… though I can’t say it’s one hundred percent accurate. Still, in order to regain the stolen million yen, if possible, before any truly decisive evidence comes out, I’d like to resolve things peacefully…”

In regards to Kondou-san’s high-handed display, Kyouko-san spoke to soothe him. Thinking it would be bad to anger her client, she added more.

“That’s why I removed Satoi-san from the equation. Whatever the case, could you hear me out? If I’m not able to convince you, do with me what you will.”

If an assistant really was the culprit, then this was definitely a deduction Satoi-sensei shouldn’t hear… if the matter was cleaned up before the evidence came out, before it became public, Satoi-sensei might be able to regain her million yen with the culprit still obscured from her view. If we make a deal for the million yen’s return in exchange for not bringing them to the authorities… that was a deal with some validity behind it.

"... I'll hear what you've got, if nothing else."

The fact Kondou-san said that, was it to save face for his friend who introduced him to her, or because he had something to think of Kyouko-san's self-confidence.

"Of course, not only will you identify the culprit, you'll also explain why Satoi-sensei would exchange one hundred million yen for one million, won't you?"

"Yes. Or rather, those two points are deeply connected..."

And the mystery-solving commenced. From my and Kondou-san's eyes, it was a strange and curious case, but to Kyouko-san, she was solving something simple and obvious.

7

“When I heard the details of the case over the phone, naturally I was confused as well. I couldn’t see Satoi-san’s motive for accepting the trade in the slightest. Therefore, I tried considering the conditions under which she would accept the offer. I thought over it as I read Satoi-sensei’s works.”

She was speaking so fast I barely noticed it, but she was describing a scene of a detective reading manga as they deduced a case… what sort of armchair detective is that? Of course, as Kyouko-san’s time was limited, she had no choice but to multitask.

“No matter how you count it, a million yen is a million yen… it can never become one hundred million. Or so one is compelled to think, but if that million yen was a ‘special’ million yen, perhaps that isn’t necessarily so. More so, without a hand lain on the expensive computers, with only the million yen stolen, I must think that million yen holds a special meaning. While I was reading volume two, I hit on the possibility the banknotes might have been used in a crime. For example, a portion of a fortune stolen in an old bank robbery or so… meaning, if that million yen went into circulation, bill by bill, her past crime would come to light, that sort of pattern.”

“Y-you’re saying Satoi-sensei took part in a bank robbery!?”

As Kondou-san’s countenance change and his hips rose, “I’m just talking possibilities, possibilities,” Kyouko-san evaded.

“Of course, no matter how I looked at it, that was nonsense… I immediately discarded the notion. There’s no way she would conceal such dangerous evidence in her refrigerator, and even if she did, she wouldn’t consult with you about it.”

“I ask that you quit with these hypotheticals in bad taste, Okitegami-san. At the present time, as the editor in charge of Satoi-san, no as a single

man, I am exhibiting a considerable level of mental fortitude. If you would keep that in mind."

"Don't worry, I have some confidence in my memory… within the day of course. Also, as absurd as that hypothetical may be, it enriched me with two suggestions, and I had no choice but to present it… by the way, just for reference, what do you two think of it? In order to exchange one million yen for one hundred million, what other possibilities can you think of? I highly doubt you haven't thought of a single hypothesis."

"… It's a million yen to remember, that's what she said herself. Something about it being the first royalty she received after becoming a manga artist."

To Kondou-san's answer, "I also took that possibility into consideration as I read volume three… but do you really think that's it?" Kyouko-san drew close. Kondou-san shook his head. Well, it's not like it didn't just barely serve as a reason, but that didn't mean someone would pay one hundred million for it.

"If it were some gemstone, a memento of a parent or a gift from a lover, even something she always kept by her side, then I could accept it. But it has neither been inherited nor gifted, and I don't think she treasures the money itself that much."

Kyouko-san softly spoke. I had thought of it as well… that fact her thoughts overlapped with mine brought some mild joy, but I'm sure that's as far as the overlap went.

"Yes. With that in mind, I started thinking along the line that one million yen was just a code, and it was really something else that was stolen… like a pet named Million or something. But if that was the case, she would say it outright. There would be no reason to hide it. I also considered this possibility. What was important wasn't the million yen itself, but perhaps a photograph or letter wedged between the bills…"

“Hmm, that is an interesting theory, and I can imagine her saying something like that. Though it’s something we’ll find out after we get it back.”

“Come to think of it, Okitegami-san, when you confirmed whether Satoi-sensei had idea notes or not… Could it be that the future developments for Satoi-sensei’s works were written on the banknotes? If that was the case, they would be valued far over one million yen, but…”

“Even if they failed to realize it was currency, I doubt there’s anyone out there who would use a ten thousand yen note as a memo sheet. Even if you subtracted the monetary value, there’s barely any space to write… Kakushidate-san, what do you think?”

As Kyouko-san turned the wind in my direction, I decided to express the two ideas I’d been keeping warm. What I had thought up along the way, my reasoning on the case.

“If it’s a ‘special’ one million yen, then how about we consider a case where the serial number is ‘special’? I’ve heard that bills with all-matching numbers have a premium value. If Satoi-sensei was a collector of such bills, then…”

“Yakusuke, that’s the first thing I thought up. Sure enough, if the serial’s numbers were all-matching, then those bills would hold a high value among collectors. But that’s at most a few times their normal value. They’re never worth one hundred times that… even if all one hundred of the ten thousand yen notes were all-matching, it wouldn’t even reach ten million.”

I-is that how it works?

“Also, I’ve never heard anything about Satoi-sensei being a collector.”

I couldn’t say a word. Rather than my reasoning being off, it was a bigger shock that the idea I had saved was the first thing Kondou-san thought up and rejected. When my thought process overlapped in this case, it was

more embarrassing than pleasant. Naturally, Kyouko-san must have already gotten there long ago (whatever volume she was reading at the time) and rejected it, or so I thought, “But that’s a good approach, Kakushidate-san,” she offered me some undeserved praise.

“Going by serial numbers really is a good approach.”

“Eh? A-are you sure?”

“That was precisely the suggestion I got from that absurd hypothetical… in the case the stolen million yen was a portion of the notes stolen during a bank heist, then why would the crime come to light if they were used? That’s because ‘The serial numbers would be rejected’. All money definitely holds equivalent value, but there isn’t a single identical banknote in the world… no two bills are alike.”

Kyouko-san said something that came so naturally when you thought about it. Even if the vague term of million yen was thrown around, there were no two identical million yens out there… no matter the million yen, when it came to how each individual bill that made it was different, it definitely did sound like some sort of hint, but even if that was the case, you could say it didn’t mean a thing. Even if each individual person was their own special snowflake, it’s the same as the urge to say so what. As long as they weren’t matching numbers or special code, no one would pay any attention to something like the serial numbers.

“Precisely, which is why I must raise the second suggestion. The first was the matter of serial numbers, and the second was you, Kondou-san.”

“… Is there something about me?”

Kondou-san warily put himself on guard for what she would have to say, but Kyouko-san spoke in a contrasting smile.

“Think back… if a million yen connected to a crime was stolen, I highly doubt she would consult with you about it, is what I said. But, then, even if that isn’t the case, there was no real reason for her to consult with you,

was there? If she didn't want to talk about the reason for her to follow along with the threats, then in the first place, Satoi-san simply shouldn't have brought the matter to Kondou-san. If she refrained, a detective like me would never have butt in. If she was told not to bring it to the police, and she thought bringing it to a detective was foul play, then consulting with her editor should be just as dubious."

"... But Kyouko-san, in regards to that, before you arrived at the studio, Satoi-sensei did lightly touch up on it. She said she wanted him to accompany her to the bank on Monday."

If she wanted to transfer one hundred million yen, that procedure would be impossible to do by ATM... but that didn't mean she would fare well if they persistently enquired into her circumstance at the teller window. With how it was set up, it would look as if she was falling victim to bank fraud... when I thought of that exchange that would surely be tedious, I feel it wouldn't be strange to want to cling to a reliable editor.

"Yes, I thought it would be something like that. She didn't look like one all too wise in the ways of the world after all. Well, look at it the other way, and I get the impression Satoi-sensei never particularly intended to hide her circumstance from Kondou-san. However... when Kondou-san harshly scolded her for carelessly hiding her money in the refrigerator, it became hard for her to tell him the rest of the story."

Because she thought he would get even angrier, said Kyouko-san... staying silent because he would be angry, would she really do something so childish, I thought, but given the impression Satoi-sensei gave off and thinking back to her relationship with Kondou-san, it did sound possible. The desire 'not to make him angry' might be one a genius holds more strongly than a normal person.

"But all that aside, don't you think that sounds just a little strange?"

"Eh? What part about it? If you're looking for something strange, from the very start I thought you wouldn't find a case stranger than this one, but..."

“If it was sum impossible for an ATM, but a transfer would make her feel guilty at the window, then she could have just taken care of it online.

Perhaps determining it was impossible for me to draw out the real answer, Kyouko-san stated the answer without putting on any airs… online banking. That’s right. Come to think of it, that’s exactly right… if she wanted to make the transfer without a second to lose, then she simply had to use the service open twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty five days a year. She wouldn’t have to confront anyone, and the transfer limit was generally higher than on ATMs… since Satoi-sensei had her assets spread across multiple accounts on multiple banks, it shouldn’t be too hard for her to transfer a sum total of one hundred million yen to the designated account. With all the formalities, the transfer itself would likely take place on Monday all the same, but if Satoi-sensei went that route, she wouldn’t have to be bothered by the teller, meaning she wouldn’t have to consult with Kondou-san.

I have my personal worries about dealing with money online, so I’ve barely ever used online banking… but as a modern-day youth who submits all her manuscripts digitally, it would be difficult to think Satoi-sensei carried on that old world sense. The cell phone she used was the latest smartphone… wouldn’t she be able to use that to complete the process nice and simple?

“Okitegami-san, is the fact she didn’t use online banking of that great importance? And never once have you connected this talk to the reason you suspect Satoi-sensei’s assistants.”

“It will connect itself very soon, no need to worry. But what’s important is not the reason she ‘didn’t’ use online banking, but the reason she ‘couldn’t’ use it… Why do you think she couldn’t use it?”

Unlike the previous one, that question only had one answer I could think of. A case where one couldn’t use an online service whether they wanted to or not, that would have to be…

“She must have forgotten her password, right… ah.”

I noticed right after it came out of my mouth. Password. A password, you say? A password she must never forget. But there are times it could be forgotten. Even if one wasn't Kyouko-san. Then would one take a memo so they wouldn't forget it? Normally, that would be the case. But in all actuality, making a memo of one's password was a double-edged sword. While it prepares one for when they forget, it's possible to lose the memo note, and the paper might enter someone else's eyes. Even if the memo is coded, you might forget the code the next time around. There would be no end to the cycle of hesitation and indecision. But, in that case, meaning… it couldn't be.

"You don't mean to say Satoi-sensei… set a bill's serial number as her password?"

8

"I've heard people who easily lose their umbrella might buy one worth tens of thousands of yen as a countermeasure so they learn to treasure it, but… it's the same way of thought. To make sure you don't lose the key, make the key itself a valuable… of course, it goes back to back with the danger of the key itself being stolen."

"B-but still…"

Trying to say something to Kyouko-san but unable to say anything, Kondou-san was at a loss for words. I didn't know Satoi-sensei well enough to talk about her so, but perhaps Kondou-sensei realized with her personality she might actually do something like that.

The serial number on a bill is a blind spot, and seeing how it's a random arrangement of numbers and letters, it's a password exceedingly difficult to identify… first off, it would be impossible to get right by chance. If that was truly the case, the value of those bills was more than several times, several tens of times over… no matter what estimate I drew for the savings of a million-unit best-selling author like Satoi-sensei, there was no way it fell short of one million yen, and I doubted it fell short of one hundred million yen either. She said she could pay one billion from her own mouth. If it was to recover that password… no? Wait a second. In that case, would there really be a need to go out of her way paying such a fortune to reclaim the passwords? Certainly, she would be unable to complete online transactions but couldn't she just directly contact the banks and have her accounts frozen?

"I'm sure that's the case when it comes to online banking. They'll strongly push a one-time password on her and it'll be over in a jiffy. But that is no more than one out of a hundred… what if- at most- one hundred individual passwords were stolen?"

Passwords apart from her online banking? Her mobile phone didn't seem to be password locked… but take for example her computer login? As a

digital submission artist, not being able to use her computer would be fatal. Or perhaps on the private side, a password for games… even a game account, once you're hooked, it's no longer a game. For credit card and online shopping passwords, those go without saying… and also.

"… And also her cloud account."

Kondou-san held his head in his arms as he spoke.

"If the idea notes for Satoi-sensei's works are preserved there… then I'm sure she would do anything to regain the password. Even if it meant paying one billion yen."

"I apologize or rather… I know I'm not one to speak, but it doesn't seem Satoi-san has a very good memory. She kept calling me 'detective' to the end, after all… I imagine the reason her phone isn't locked is because she would be troubled once she forgot it. Her overreaction when I turned talks towards her idea references was the deciding factor in my deduction. Gave me the feeling she didn't want anyone to touch on that point."

I was under the impression that exchange was a social courtesy to get her to lower her guard, but it seems at that point, Kyouko-san was already swiftly probing into various things. No, if I wanted to bring that up, as Kyouko-san only had today, I can't think she had any background knowledge on the cloud or online banking so I must conclude she did her research in advance… at a considerably early point, it seems Kyouko-san had already set up her theory… while reading manga. Then that's why she called the truth simple and obvious.

"Her house may be another story, but the reason she kept one million yen lying around her workplace was a mystery. Yet if there was a necessity to keep it at her studio, then my conjecture was that perhaps the million yen- or realistically, a portion of it- was used in her work."

Strictly speaking, if they have different colorations, it's possible for some serial numbers to have the same sequence, and I don't think ever serial code on each of the hundred bills corresponded to a password; I surmise less than half, around a fourth were critical, and the rest were fakes,

camouflage. With those scarce numbers, if she linked each to an alphabet letter in her head, then even if her memory was on the worse side, she wouldn't end up jumbled with multiple passwords.

"Then the reason you suspect her assistant… what's more, starting with the ones who've worked with her longest is because they're the ones with the highest probability of witnessing her confirming the bills in the refrigerator before accessing her cloud account… is it? Meaning, not only knowing the hiding place of the bills, to know the reason those bills were 'special' it would have to be an individual working at the same studio…"

"That's also true, but."

Kyouko-san spoke unconcernedly.

"I got the impression the culprit was convinced Satoi-sensei would pay one hundred million yen for that million… not a completed manuscript, only an idea before it even became a work. The only ones who could discern such value from it… the only ones who could understand the true value of an idea would have to be the comrades who worked alongside her."

"…"

Hearing that, Kondou-san shut his mouth. I couldn't tell how he took the basis of Kyouko-san's reasoning… 'Doubt them precisely because they're comrades who understand the value of work', in the end, that line of thought was one paper-thin margin away from recklessly suspecting friends, but if that's how he put it, then his own position from where he respected the creativity of authors was also just that close to her reasoning. The only difference lay in that Kondou-san was an editor, and Kyouko-san was a detective.

"B-but… Kyouko-san. Didn't you also say full of confidence that you thought the stolen million yen was worth more than one hundred million? It's not like you ever worked alongside Satoi-sensei…"

I said in desperation. Unable to endure a scene where my great benefactor Kondou-san was simply talked down to, it was like I was going against my other great benefactor Kyouko-san… but it wasn't such a foolish question, and in truth, Kyouko-san smiled and gave an instant response.

"Why of course. I'm no novelist, but… I know the value of a memory and the fear of losing it better than anyone. I can't be certain but I'm sure I realize it every day."

9

What happened afterward was little more than a diversion to pass the time… even if I say that, barring redundancy, there is barely anything to add on this time around… but even so, I must write a number of things for future reference.

The person who stole one million yen from Satoi-sensei's studio refrigerator and later made the threatening call to her phone was, as Kyouko-san deduced, one of the assistants… Kondou-san conducted his own investigation, pinning them down in a mere few hours. If I had to say, this resolution was one for Kondou-san's proficiency to shine through, but… that person was a veteran assistant who used to serve as chief. The past tense of the 'used to serve' part carried with it some fetters and gloom but in the end, a detailed elucidation of their motive was never carried out.

It was settled peacefully, or perhaps.

I won't blame you for it… that sort of thing.

Of course, even Kyouko-san wasn't an omnipotent detective and there were some parts of her theory that missed the mark. The fact that Satoi-sensei was unable to identify the culprit from their tone of voice in the call; it seems Kyouko-san had attributed it to Satoi-sensei's terrible memory… which meant Satoi-sensei's inability to even remember her assistant's voices, her carelessness in a bad sense, and the lack of consideration she held for her surroundings precisely because she was a genius may have played a role in their motive to carry out the offense, she surmised, but that deduction was a complete miss.

Or rather, Satoi-sensei's testimony there was false, and the truth of the matter was that at the point she received the call, she already had a very good idea who the culprit was. I've only casually picked these facts up in hearsay and I'm still rather hazy on them, but it seems a part of her wanted to cover for the culprit. But perhaps between her and the culprit,

she had some knowledge of why they'd do it in the first place, or she remembered something relevant… without any evidence, I doubt she could say something too uncertain, and perhaps you could call it the work of the creator or the carelessness of a genius, but to Satoi-sensei, rather than who the culprit was, the important part was whether she could reclaim her password or not. Clients tell lies… it was just as Kyouko-san said. Of course, in this case, Satoi-sensei wasn't the client, strictly speaking.

By the way, in her internet passwords, for her established 'Secret Recovery Questions', Satoi-sensei would arbitrarily enter digits at random… never saving passwords, she would enter them anew every time, and perhaps not preparing for if she ever forgot them was also a form of security, but as this incident happened among those close to her, perhaps I should say that decision was correct.

The culprit quietly left Satoi-sensei's studio, they would never get any work with Sakusousha again, but that was the extent of their punishment… in exchange for that multifaceted settlement, as one would expect, Satoi-sensei's million yen was returned. It seems the culprit said, 'It was just a bit of fun, I intended to return both the million and hundred million once it was over', but I wonder. That one's just a bit too suspicious… though it's not good to suspect someone without any evidence.

"But it really is mysterious. Setting banknote serial numbers as passwords, since it's come to this result, you could call it careless, but at least it's still smarter than hiding money in the refrigerator. And since he said that, I don't think he's going to scold her too much for it… but if she just honestly confessed it to Kondou-san at the start, it wouldn't have become this convoluted."

Leaving the conclusion to Kondou-san, after leaving the Sakusousha building with Kyouko-san, I ended up muttering such a thing… I didn't ask it with any expectations of a response, but Kyouko-san,

"Satoi-san is probably in love with Kondou-san. While I said that in front of Kondou-san, rather than not wanting to make him angry, she was

probably just embarrassed. Perhaps she didn't want him to see her as an idiot and feel disappointed."

"W-what are you deducing that from, Kyouko-san?"

"It's not at a level I can call a deduction, just intuition… a woman's intuition. If you don't want me to put it like that, perhaps the impression they gave off? When it comes to these sorts of things, I've never been wrong."

"……"

"Well, Kondou-san is a wonderful person after all. If the culprit is a woman, that might be related to their motive… just kidding."

I saw Kondou-san and Satoi-sensei's relationship as father and daughter, but perhaps Kyouko-san's impression was more accurate. At the very least, age-wise… Kondou-san's still a bachelor, anyways. No, what Kyouko-san spoke of was simply from Satoi-sensei's perspective, and she hadn't touched on Kondou-san's feelings. Whatever the case, by how she was using a woman's intuition instead of a detective's intuition, it had a strange persuasiveness to it, but it was dangerous to take without a grain of salt. Never being wrong was just her self-evaluation, and even if she was wrong, she'd just forget… looking back on it, apart from the restricted call from the culprit, a majority of her call log was filled with Kondou-san, so perhaps that was the basis she set her theory on… but I also get the feeling that was only the natural result if she carried out her work normally, and Kyouko-san was just digging too deep into it. When Kyouko-san gave a smile back then, it was simply because her phone not being password-locked gave some backing to her deduction. Surely. But…

But in my failure as a narrator, while I did think this topic was vital in uncovering the mystery, I did not want to dig any further… When Kyouko-san called Kondou-san a 'wonderful person', I don't know how serious she was, but whatever the case, I didn't want to talk to her about Kondou-san.

Therefore, that's the end of that… is what I'd like to say, but there is still one thing I need to touch on. What I heard from Kondou-san once

everything was gone and done with. Vague as it was, the matter was settled, and without taking any breaks in print, Satoi-sensei continued to draw her manga… that was well and good but at the end, Kondou-san said,

"Hey, Yakusuke. Has Okitegami-san ever spent time overseas? She resembles a certain person I met while working at Sakusousha's foreign distribution branch, but…"

He asked me. The reason Kondou-san seemed so surprised when he first met Kyouko-san was by no means because of her white hair, he said it was because she was identical to an old friend. Disturbed as I was, I had only met Kyouko-san two years prior, and after answering I didn't know what happened before that,

"I see. No, I'm sure it's just my imagination. It's just an accidental resemblance. I see no reason for that person to be running a detective business in Japan… what's more, her personality is completely different. She wasn't such a- and I don't mean anything when I say this- such a shameless person. I've said something unnecessary, just forget about it."

Kondou-san brought it to a close, and the talk was over… but even if he told me that, there was no way I could forget.

From my point of view, Kyouko-san had been in the detective industry from the moment I first met her, helping me out whenever I was in trouble. She was Okitegami Kyouko of the Okitegami Detective Agency… but a Kyouko-san before she lost her memory, before she continued losing her memory surely existed at some time or place. Even if that 'someone' Kondou-san met was an accidental resemblance, a Kyouko-san who wasn't Kyouko-san, 'Yesterday's Kyouko-san' definitely existed sometime, somewhere. That alone is absolute.

And for the first time, on that day, I grew conscious of such an obvious fact.

Kyouko-san has a lost setting… it might be overseas, and it might be somewhere else entirely. All that is certain is that no matter what key is

used, no matter what price is paid, that setting can never be regained, and shall never return to Kyouko-san's side. My thoughts driven by that past, I came to realize once more. Without any exaggeration, Kyouko-san… truly only ever had today.

(Let me Introduce Myself, Kyouko-san– Case Forgotten)

Chapter 3:

Are you Free, Kyouko-san

1

To greater or lesser extent, detectives are generally those moved by curiosity. That was not something limited to the great detectives of literary works… while they undertook background checks and looked into extramarital affairs- the so-called realistic work of detectives- it was certain that the 'desire to know' hidden and concealed information was the origin point of their professional interest. You're hearing that from me: someone who's accompanied along on countless cases; I've even been on the verge of sitting on the electric chair, and that's precisely why I've seen so many detectives, detectives of all sort from every angle imaginable. I have no doubt in my words… but if in order to prove this pet theory, you ask I purposely hold a keen predator's eye to search out the exception, then the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko would be the first to come to mind.

Of course, Kyouko-san was a single living human being, and she had her own interests and hobbies… It's difficult to think she was serving as a detective completely without the desire to learn things or the want to unravel the unknown. Those sorts of feelings are human nature. However, even if she exhibited her curiosity, even if she realized the truth of the matter, the hidden side of a case, a concealed truth… at night when she hits the bed and sleeps, she'll have lost it all by the next day.

In a sense that she perfectly protected a detective's occupational ethics and duty of confidentiality, Kyouko-san was more suited to be a detective than anyone… but that was only so when looked at from the bleachers, and I wonder what Kyouko-san herself things of the role she's been placed in.

Stocking up on new information, learning what one never knew before should be a pleasant feeling to anyone, but if she was simply to forget it by the next day, was she compelled to feel how meaningless it all was?

In last time's Million Exchange, she read all the works of the manga artist Satoi Aritsugu to resolve the case, also gaining information on the cloud, but she had already completely forgotten them… in such a state, how

Kyouko-san maintained the motivation to continue on in her trade was beyond me.

What thoughts went through her head as she did her detective work… in the first place, was there any thought, any emotion to it? If she said there was no such thing, then forget curiosity, Kyouko-san might not even be able to come to like anything.

That reasoning on my part was extremely heartrending for me.

2

By all means, let me thank you for your help in Satoi-sensei's case. When Kondou-san offered such a strong invite to dinner, it would be a lie to say the foolish giant didn't hold any excessive expectations… by which I mean to say, I had still yet to find my next workplace. This is what they mean when they say poverty dulls the wit, and cutting through my severance package, I continued a life of unemployment.

While Kondou-san consulted with me on Satoi-sensei's case, somehow bringing it to a hazy conclusion, in the first place, back then, I was unable to beg for his help in searching for a job. In the end, after that, I didn't want to get in Kondou-san's way as he gained control of the situation, so I refrained from making any requests from my side, but as expected of a capable man. Surely he had figured it out without me saying anything this time around, meaning his 'thanks' was of course, in regards to my next place of employment. I arbitrarily convinced myself, dressing in business casual as I made for the high-class restaurant I would never be able to enter alone.

But when I was led to a private room, contrary to my expectations, Kondou-san softly asked, "Yakusuke. Do you now the novelist called Sunaga Hirubee?" Last time around, due to my own indolence, I didn't know of the artist Satoi Aritsugu that Kondou-san was charged with but, no, I doubt even the unaware wouldn't know the name Sunaga Hirubee.

"Good grief, you take me lightly, Kondou-san. When it comes to Sunaga-sensei, that's a name you can't avoid passing through if you even so much as casually touch upon the world of Japanese literary canon. A maestro among maestros, the mainstay of Japanese mystery. I've read his works, and so have my parents. Perhaps even my grandparents have gotten a taste of his work. If you go to a bookstore's mystery corner and grab ten books at random, I'm sure around half of them will have his name on them."

"Fufufu, now that's going overboard, but that metaphor does capture the essence."

Kondou-san gave a joyful nod. Of course, his reaction probably came from the fact the Sakusousha company he worked for put out Sunaga-sensei's works as well…come to think of it, before becoming editor-and-chief of a manga magazine, I remember Kondou-san was in the novel section, so perhaps he's even met the author before.

"Wait… you don't mean to tell me a threat came to Sunaga-sensei's place this time, do you? Please say it's something different. I came because you said you wanted to give your thanks."

I exchanged some light banter… of course, if it was a request from Kondou-san, then without a second of doubt, I would naturally accept it. In the first place, when it came to last time's threat call, the one who resolved it was Kyouko-san and I was just the intermediary… I'm sure Kondou-san has already paid her the appropriate amount (As she only had that day, Kyouko-san's generally took immediate payments), from the start, he had no obligation to give me anything. In the first place, if we're talking about debts and tabs, my debt to him is far greater. I probably won't be able to repay it for the rest of my life.

"No, no, settle down, young Yakusuke. No matter how much a bloodthirsty vortex the publishing industry might be, we don't get those peculiar incidents so often… the authors and editors all generally spend boring everyday lives without trouble. Not everyone's like you, after all."

"Oh my, you went and said it. There's no way I can argue with that. But in that case, what's up with Sunaga-sensei?"

Was Sunaga-sensei recruiting a housekeeper or something? Was that how it was? That one wasn't a metaphor or anything, he was an old author who worked from my grandparents' generation, so perhaps he needed people around to look after him… or so I held such a selfish, convenient expectation, but as if seeing through my foolish forecast,

"Sunaga-sensei is still in considerably good health, and if given the chance, he'll go at his work with much more vigor than any of our young hands."

He said.

Now that really was something to congratulate him for, but in that case, the business I was called for became increasingly unclear… though Kondou-san seemed to be somewhat enjoying my bewilderment.

“One of my contemporaries, a man called Konaka is currently in charge of him, and just the other day, Sunaga finished up the latest of his lengthy mystery novels.”

“That’s splendid. Send him my regards.”

“Now about that. How should I put it, a novelist is an occupation quite easy to retire from. It’s a job one does on their own without being bound to an organization or personal relations, ‘quit at your high point,’ it’s one of the few titles that allows you to give up when on the rise. That alone makes me thankful as a publisher that we have a life-serving author like Sunaga-sensei on our side… but that’s only to a certain degree. Even as he puts on years, Sunaga-sensei’s is someone whose playful heart hasn’t changed.”

“Playful heart, eh.”

“You could call it curiosity, but… he won’t immediately hand the books he’s completed over to the publishers. Instead, he does what I take as testing his supervising editor.”

“Testing… what’s this, it has a bit of a gentle ring to it.”

“Yes and no, a bit of good fun. The product of a playful heart. You could call it a game, perhaps… and I’ve challenged that game once before. I’ve never directly been in charge of him, but one of my senior editors dragged me along. Instead of a manuscript, he was handed what looked like a treasure map, ‘If you call yourself the editor of a mystery author, then why don’t you find the manuscript I’ve hidden somewhere?’ is what he said.”

“Hmm, what a strange person.”

He worked so hard to write it, so he could just hand it over to make sure it became a book quicker. It's not like the thought didn't cross my mind, but, well, I guess you could call that way of doing things mystery author-esque. A treasure hunt… a standard game for mystery maniacs.

"It's gone beyond where you can call him strange. If the editor in charge can't find the script with all the hints he's been given, it's happened before that the manuscript flowed over to a different publishing company."

"T-that's no joke."

"He doesn't do that sort of thing anymore, but back in his golden years, there was practically a competition between publishers. Reserving amusement parks and baseball stadiums…"

"How extravagant. But I can't help but feel the times."

"The grandest one I know of was when he rented out a casino hall overseas. The various editors in charge of him from different publishing companies competed and scrambled over the total five hundred pages hidden around the hall… since a book couldn't be made if even one of them was missing, the publishers waged those writing sheets in place of chips, deciding the bout with roulette and cards."

It sounded interesting if I heard it as someone else's business, but if it was done in the modern era where freezing information was difficult, it sounded like the sort of event that would become a major problem… as he watched in enjoyment as the publishers went this way and that, competing for his manuscript, he must have considerably bad taste, but from what I could see of Kondou-san's expression when he spoke about Sunaga-sensei, 'There's no helping that guy, he really is a bother', was what I read, and perhaps he was the type of author beloved by his editors. A good-natured old man who loved his spot of mischief, perhaps. If you'll let an unemployed guy who's suspected and hated for everything have his say, I can only be envious. But if you called it an innate difference in virtue, that was the end of the story.

“Then you’re telling me another nuisance treasure hunt is going on for the novel he just finished writing?”

“That’s right. As you’d expect, he’s not so flashy at his age, but it’s been arranged to take place at Sunaga-sensei’s villa… Konaka’s holding his head.”

Just the word villa was plenty luxurious but, well, when you boil it down, it’s a happening from a different world than the one I live in… I couldn’t see any signs of my employment being decided, but that contemporary Konaka aside, it didn’t sound like this story was troubling Kondou-san himself, so I detached myself from it and listened to the story. The tale suddenly changed… Sunaga-sensei’s new work was suddenly connected to Kondou-san’s gratitude.

“So anyways. In that manuscript search game, he accepted the use of helpers. So Yakusuke. Do you want to go to Sunaga-sensei’s villa with Okitegami-san?”

“Eh?”

I was surprised to hear Kyouko-san suddenly come up.

What, is that it? He wants to request the manuscript search to Kyouko-san?

“No, I can’t do that, Kondou-san. I was wondering what you were going to say, but even if it’s a request from you, that’s not happening. Kyouko-san is definitely a detective… a great detective, so treasure hunts and lost item searches are her specialty, but it’s precisely because she’s a professional. We can’t have her take part in a game geared towards amateurs.”

“Hmhmm, Yakusuke, you’ve got quite a mouth on you. To call the man who supported the mystery novel world for close to half a century an amateur.”

Come to think of it, my statement was on a level it wouldn't be strange to criticize, but Kondou-san's mood actually improved… as if to say he was expecting this response from me. However, as I couldn't tell his true intent, I had no choice but to dance on the palm of his hand.

"O-of course Sunaga-sensei is no amateur… I can't think the manuscript's hiding place is anywhere easy."

"Far from it, it's considerably difficult. When it comes to thinking up puzzles and tricks, a mystery author is a much greater professional than a detective."

"Yeah, I'm sure that'd true. But the problem is the fact it's a game. There are various types of detectives and a considerable number of them who don't care if it's a game or quiz as long as they can solve the mystery… However, Kyouko-san is an occupational detective, a person who makes it clear she solves mysteries as a business. No matter how appealing the mystery before her eyes, she doesn't deduce for fun, and she won't work for free… she might hike up her prices, but she never lowers them. If I tell her to solve a game, she might take it as an insult. She might take the very fact I made the request as disrespect."

No, it's not like I've particularly heard out Kyouko-san's policy as a detective… but after accompanying her on a large number of cases, I had a general idea. A pro doesn't sell their craft short.

"The fact Sunaga-sensei doesn't hand over his manuscript so easily, having his editors carry out such an eccentric ritual might be for the same reason… well, whatever the case, I can't think that Kyouko-san will take up such a job."

"Perhaps if it's a job. But how about if it's not?"

"Mn? What was that? Even if you tell me it's not a job or something like that… you're saying some especially cryptic things today, Kondou-san. If it's not a job, that's even more reason for her not to come. She's far more firm with money than her appearance or behavior may suggest, you fully realized that as well, didn't you?"

“You’re slow on the uptake, Yakusuke. I’ll say it again and again, but certainly, Sunaga-sensei’s manuscript search is just a game. The pastime of some influential author… I said it might slip away to a different company if we didn’t find it, but this time’s a rare case. Until the editor finds it, Sunaga-sensei will continue to give hints, and if he can’t find it no matter what, ‘I actually have a consolation prize’ he said he would prepare a different manuscript for us. If a professional detective showed up, it would actually put a damper on his spirits.”

“In that case…”

“In that case, Yakusuke.”

Thus spake Kondou-san.

“I’m inviting you out for a date with Okitegami-san.”

3

“I’ll go, I’ll go, I’m totally going! I’ll climb the highest mountain to get there! The Okitegami Detective Agency will be temporarily closed that day! You listen here, you definitely can’t invite someone else in my place!”

… I gained an OK much stronger than I expected.

No, the scene had yet to change. On Kondou-san’s strong demand, I simply dialed up Kyouko-san on the spot… Even if you called us friends across age and position, it’s at times like these that his former position as my boss becomes clear.

I called a detective.

I phoned in the Okitegami Detective Agency.

It was already the dead of the night, and at the start of the call, a Kyouko-san who’d forgotten me as per usual was in a clear, ‘Our business hours for the day are over’ mode, and once she figured out I was calling for something of a game, she was just about to enter ‘I must politely decline’ mode after all, but under Kondou-san’s instruction, I brought up Sunaga Hirubee only to hear her reactions take a complete turnabout.

In a high spirited voice I had never heard before, Kyouko-san bit on, hook, line, and sinker.

“Yes. Sunday a week from now. I’ve already written it on my arm. So you can’t take it back. Even if I forget it, I’ll remember it every morning. Indeed, to think I can confirm such a wonderful schedule every morning, this is the best! … Umm, Kakushidate Yakusuke-san, was it? I’ll be counting on you that day.”

When Kyouko-san wasn’t supposed to take any prior reservations, I somehow got an appointment in a week’s time… it felt like I was

dreaming, or rather, it was all hazy and lacking in a sense of reality, or rather, is it really alright for such a thing to come to pass? I couldn't believe it.

"Well then, Kakushidate-san, a good night to you!"

"Y-yes… good night, Kyouko-san."

I couldn't quite hold a long phone call in a restaurant, so without knowing what was going on, the line cut off… no, of course, I was much happier than I'd be if she refused, but was it supposed to be this easy to invite Kyouko-san on a date?

Under Kondou-san's strong urgings, and the carefree thought that, 'even if she rejects me, Kyouko-san will have forgotten by tomorrow,' I got ahead of myself and did it, but…

"W-what is the meaning of this, Kondou-san? You're acting like you knew this would happen from the start…"

"I had a general idea. Okitegami-san's a huge Sunaga-sensei fan. All his core readers know of his 'manuscript searches' themselves, and there's no way a fan of her level would let go of an opportunity to get involved with his manuscript before its publishing."

"I-is that so…"

His answer was a bit of a let-down. Well, from Kyouko-san's point of view, I was a self-proclaimed good customer of unknown identity, so there's no way she said yes because I was the one asking, but… I see, so this is what Kondou-san meant by thanks, a little late, I was finally coming to understand.

"But Kondou-san, I'm surprised you knew Kyouko-san was such a zealous Sunaga-sensei fan. I practically live in the detective industry and even I didn't know that."

“Mn? Ah, that’s, well, publishers have a good information network, see…”

Why did he prevaricate there? Perhaps this information came from a source none to easy to talk about… and that considered, it felt best not to stick my head into it. It was none of my concern where he got his information.

As it became clear in Satoi-sense’s case as well, to Kyouko-san who was missing at least a few years’ worth of memory, her ‘favorite author’ would have to be one from a past generation, so the fact that Sunaga-sensei was still an active author worked in my favor.

No, though Kondou-san’s the one who set the table.

“And who knows? If Okitegami-san does find the manuscript, it’ll help out Sakusousha. Having Okitegami-san play around is half part of my job. I’m just doing my normal duties.”

Sure enough, looking at it the other way, dragging Kyouko-san in as a form of entertainment meant that Sakusousha wouldn’t have to pay her work fee, so Kondou-san might just be an exceedingly proficient addition to his company… a profitable talent as a friend as well.

“And it’s clear as day you’ve got a thing for Okitegami-san.”

“I-I don’t got anything towards her. Oy, oy, no need to be suspicious, Kondou-san. I’ve got enough unjust suspicion to deal with as it is. Take this time, for instance. I just played along and invite her as a form of gratitude for all the times she’s helped me out.”

“Is it really unjust? After you left, Satoi-sensei got into a heated discussion on the topic.”

Seriously… I’ve known Kondou-san a long time, so I get why he’d say it, but even Satoi-sensei? Do I really act that suspicious when I’m around Kyouko-san… in that case, that’s something to think about. Calling Kyouko-san to crime scenes might just be increasing the suspicions

directed at me. I'd like to think Satoi-sensei just has sharp eyes as a creator.

"No, no, Kondou-san. As you might presume, at the very least, I don't hate her, but that person is much too far from my reach… I can't imagine anything coming from it."

If I was in middle or high school, I might have thought differently, but I was already twenty-five. While unemployed, I was a splendid adult. Just a little too old to move on the impulse of admiration alone. I couldn't help but put it all to addition and subtraction to calculate what was to come. Whether we suited one another, I put my feelings on the scale to come out with an answer.

"I wonder. I actually think you suit her quite a bit. Someone who gets dragged into cases, and someone who solves them."

"If it's as client and detective, we're a match made in heaven. That's how the market works, and I'm satisfied with that relationship… but I'll happily accept your consideration this time around. Thank you, Kondou-san. But please, keep it to just this once."

I tried to play cool as I answered, but inside, my giddiness didn't fall any short from Kyouko-san's. It was too work-related to call a date, lacking in any passion, and I did somewhat feel guilty that I was deceiving Kyouko-san… but, however.

However, I should just call it my curse; what was just a silly game, nothing more than an event born from an old man's playful heart would end up rolling in an unexpected direction… oblivious to all that, I spent a merry sleepless week.

4

Thinking back, it wasn't limited to Kyouko-san, I had a deep fellowship with many a great detective, but when it came to how his or her private life was, my thoughts had never been driven that far—but of course, it was a blind point, and if I had to say, I had no need to say at all. A detective was one who peered into another's private life, one on the prying side, and rarely even in novels do we get a close-up on a detective's private life.

Seeing them, him or her, as a sort of mechanism in place to resolve a case, I honestly admit it never bothered me how they usually lived their lives… well, in my case, whenever I called them in, I had some sort of false suspicion on me, and it completely wasn't the time for that.

But no matter how proficient, how high in demand a great detective was, it's not like they were me, and I doubt they were chased around by trouble on a daily basis… difficult cases didn't happen so often. They're sure to have days where they waste their time and days they complain about their boredom with considerable frequency. No, even on a day where they're worked to death by a sealed-room murder, once they return home, I'm sure they flip on the TV or read a book… From the time they get up to the time they go to bed, there's no person who's a detective with no space in between. They've got to have things they like, and perhaps even a family who lives with them.

While Kondou-san incited me into inviting Kyouko-san on a date, come to think of it, there's no guarantee Kyouko-san doesn't have a significant other… I was so full of myself I didn't know a single thing about Kyouko-san.

… Of course, if I brought that to the table, Kyouko-san knew far less about me, and given the thought process of 'A man I don't know invited me over the phone so I'm going to play at the villa of an author I like,' I could say she was somewhat careless as an adult woman… when away from a case, was that how great detectives were?

“Ah. Good day, you must be Kakushidate-san. It’s a pleasure to meet you, I’m Okitegami Kyouko. You have my gratitude for today.”

A week later, in front of the station we arranged to meet, I ran into Kyouko-san… ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you,’ she said. I hadn’t seen her since Satoi-sensei’s case, and to her, this was our first meeting.

Thick-soled sneakers and denim shorts. A half-sleeve shirt dress, an orange vest, and if I had to say, a considerable amount of exposed skin. Was the reason her fashion seemed looser than usual because she prioritized easy-to-move-in clothing for the event? Or was it because she was here on private business, not as the head of a detective agency? From how she didn’t conceal the skin on her arms or legs, I got the feeling it was the latter, but…

“Yes. Likewise, it’s a pleasure to be of your acquaintance. I’ve already bought the tickets, so let’s head for the platform.”

After we both lowered our heads in greeting, the sense this was a date had already disappeared, but, well, that was a load off my mind. Even if Kyouko-san had no intentions of going on a date, that was fine in itself.

“Kakushidate-san, do you like Sunaga-sensei’s works?”

Kyouko-san happily asked… to answer her question honestly, it was hard to say I was a good reader of Sunaga works. I definitely knew the name, and there was a time in my life I read him with glee, but looking at numbers alone, I doubt I’ve read more than ten of his books… but. I didn’t have enough integrity to be honest to the fan before my eyes so, “Yes,” I nodded.

“Is that so. Well then today must be a good day for you too. It truly is the best. Sunaga-sensei’s unpublished work. If we find it, you think they’ll let us read it through?”

“I-I wonder… I mean, it hasn’t been published yet, so I think it’ll be difficult to get a read. In that case, you could ask for his autograph.”

I tried matching the flow, but to that, “What are you talking about? Don’t you know Sunaga-sensei hates being asked for autographs more than anything?” came Kyouko-san’s surprised response.

“Be careful you don’t say something so rude, even by mistake.”

She really gave it to me… at the moment my standing was no longer as her client, Kyouko-san lost her mercy. So this is how she acts in private… then I’d be better off keeping my mouth shut in regards to Sunaga-sensei. I wouldn’t want to say something unnecessary and show my real colors.

Thus, even after we boarded the express train, there were absolutely no conversations to speak of, but Kyouko-san didn’t seem to mind it. She was simply cheerful… Perhaps to prepare or review, she read a Sunaga-sensei paperback in the seat beside mine. It was titled ‘Brother’s Exchange Rate’… a novel that didn’t let me predict any of its contents from the title. Perhaps she was rereading and perhaps not. More than anything, I’ve always gotten the feeling a person who reads a book when they’re with someone else must have a strong heart… but in the first place, unlike Kondou-san, I’m not good at tasteful conversation, and perhaps gazing at Kyouko-san like that was satisfaction enough.

But when we were around halfway to Sunaga-sensei’s villa, the situation took a sudden change… even if I say that, it wasn’t as if the train crashed of anything so dynamic, the only event that happened was the call that came to my phone.

It was from Kondou-san.

“Pardon me,” I said and stood from my seat. Moving from the car to the coupling, I slid my finger across the touch panel to undo the lock and receive the call.

“Yakusuke. Sorry, are you already on the train?”

“Yeah. Did something happen?”

Kondou-san had gone ahead with his colleague, Sunaga-sensei's editor Konaka, arriving at the villa the previous day. They were scheduled to come meet us at the closest station today, but… perhaps another job came in, and he called to say they would be late. They were busy people, or rather, to Kondou-san, what he was doing right now was outside his duties, so it was possible. But even so, I had prepared a map beforehand, so in the worst-case scenario, we could make it to the villa on our own.

But that wasn't it… it wasn't nearly so soft.

"Big trouble. Last night, Sunaga-sensei passed away."

5

“No, don’t misunderstand. This isn’t a murder case… he wasn’t killed, and it wasn’t an accident. Last night, his heart failed on him while he was asleep, there is absolutely nothing to point to this being an incident, it was a peaceful death, I hear.”

From the relief I felt on those words, my way of thought had been splendidly poisoned by trouble… I don’t know his specific age, but Sunaga-sensei was supposed to be considerably old, so these things happen. But since I heard he was in good health, having just finished up a manuscript, I never even considered falling into this situation.

“Yeah, that’s why the manuscript has become a posthumous work…”

He hadn’t sorted through his feelings yet, Kondou-san kept meek… I know this is shameful for me as an adult man, but I don’t know how to send my condolences at a time like this. Even if I was by no means a devoted fan, I did feel sorry that one of the great authors supporting up Japan’s literary world had passed, making it difficult to spin my words.

“So Yakusuke. About today’s schedule.”

“Y-yeah, I understand completely, Kondou-san. Of course the manuscript hunt is discontinued. Now’s not the time for that. Umm… I wouldn’t want to be in the way, so we can turn back now.”

I had no close relationship to the deceased, so surely paying a visit now would be strange. Kyouko-san’s short pants were out of the question, and I wasn’t any better off. I was on an outing with the literary woman I admired, wearing a considerably festive outfit that fell no short of her own… there should be a limit to being dressed poorly for the occasion. Unfortunately, we could only return for the day. Get off at the next station… ah, but what should I say to Kyouko-san?

“No, wait a second. It would be troubling if you returned. We need Okitegami-san’s power.”

“Eh? What do you mean by that? Didn’t you just say there was no chance it was an incident? In that case, there’s no place for a detective to step in.”

And even less space for a side character like me. Or so I thought, but,

“And I also said this. The manuscript he wrote would become Sunaga-sensei’s posthumous work… but as luck would have it, the only one who knew the whereabouts of that work was Sunaga-sensei.”

Kondou-san said.

“Eh… then.”

“Right, he personally hid it somewhere in his villa without anyone’s cooperation… meaning Sunaga Hirubee’s last work is nowhere to be found at the present moment.”

“……”

I swallowed my breath at what that would mean. No, when someone had just died, did a single novel really matter? Or so what compromises a large portion of the world might say, and it’s not like I didn’t understand where they were coming from. But even so, if you’ll let me voice my opinion… Having Sunaga-sensei’s final work be buried up without ever going into the world is something that should never come to be. By my unreserved opinion, with an author in Sunaga-sensei’s class, losing a posthumous manuscript was a much more serious matter than losing his written will.

I think that when I can’t even call myself an idealistic fan, so I can imagine what the publishers Kondou-san and the editor in charge Konaka-san are thinking… perhaps they even think not making a book of that manuscript as a criminal offense.

“You already searched?”

“Yeah, though just lightly. But at the moment, it has yet to be found… to be honest, I don’t even know where to start.”

Kondou-san was so sharp his colleagues called him the razer, but to his discredit, mysteries were outside his area of expertise… still, if a specialist called Konaka-san was working with him and it still wasn’t found, then it can’t have been hidden anywhere simple.

Normally, until the editor found the manuscript, Sunaga-sensei would continue giving out hints, but now that Sunaga-sensei was gone, we couldn’t hope for any more hints.

They could only find it with their own power.

No, even if it wasn’t their own power, the use of helpers was accepted.

“So that’s why you need Kyouko-san?”

“Yep. That’s why we need her. I do feel sorry for ruining your long-awaited date, but now that it’s come to this, I’d like to make a formal job request to Okitegami-san. I’ll definitely compensate you for this, and of course, I’ll pay Okitegami-san’s usual fee so… could you break it to her? Tell her we need to find Sunaga Hirubee’s last manuscript.”

Got it, leave it to me… I was on the verge of talking big, but just barely managed to swallow down that boast.

No, it’s not like I wasn’t confident I could do it.

If I told her Sunaga-sensei’s posthumous manuscript was going to be lost at this rate, then a die-hard fan like Kyouko-san would surely take up the request in a word or two… and with the detective skills I placed my trust in, I do think she’d be able to find it wherever it was concealed in the villa.

So when it came to that point, I had no hesitation to serve as the intermediary… however.

“Kondou-san. About my compensation, there is just one thing I’d like you to do for me now.”

“Mn? What is it? You don’t have to put it like that, I’ll gladly hear out most requests from you.”

“It can just be for today.”

Said I.

“Would you be able to cover up the fact of Sunaga-sensei’s passing from Kyouko-san?”

“Meaning have Okitegami-san search for the manuscript as per the scheduled game? No, I’m not so sure about that…”

It went without saying that Kondou-san showed indecision at my exorbitant request.

“Even if we shelve the ethical problem for the time being, it would pain my heart to trick her into working under the impression it’s all a game. That’s on a different level from letting her have fun with her work… and taking a step back, is there really a need to tell such a lie?”

“Don’t misunderstand me, Kondou-san. I’m not saying it because I want to continue my date with Kyouko-san…”

Though I can’t guarantee I had absolutely no such intent… still, at the very least, my strongest motive was something else. I’m sure the strongest was still my desire not to disappoint Kyouko-san as she was so cheerfully looking forward to our arrival at the villa… even if it’s information she would learn before long, I didn’t want today’s Kyouko-san to hear of the death of an author she was a huge fan of.

It would be too cruel of a rise and fall.

I wasn't confident I could get it across in a gentle way.

"Whatever the case, the very fact she'll be looking for the manuscript won't change. Even if Kyouko-san searches with the thought she's taking part in an event, it shouldn't be any inconvenience to Sakusousha."

"But once she realizes she's been lied to afterward, it will only increase her..."

Stopping in mid-sentence, it seems Kondou-san realized along the way. That's right... Kyouko-san only had today. No matter what feelings she does what with today, once tomorrow comes, she'll have forgotten it all.

That's precisely why I had to.

If she was going to forget... that's precisely why, at the very least, I wanted her to spend one day of fun. Even if it didn't remain as a good memory, I wanted her to spend a good day. Perhaps these were overbearing arbitrary feelings, but... still, I couldn't contain them. I never really thought of a Kyouko-san who wasn't a detective, but in her life, I wanted to create at least one more non-detective day for her... It was exceedingly none of my business, but that's how I came to see it.

"... I couldn't tell you whether that's the right course of action or not, but certainly to Sakusousha, as long as the posthumous manuscript is found, we will be able to offer some recompense to all the work Sunaga-sensei has done for us... well, even if I call it recompense, in the end, when we're just trying to sell Sunaga-sensei's last work, you might be the more upright one. Got it, I'll take responsibility and arrange so that word of Sunaga-sensei's death doesn't get to Okitegami-san."

"Thank you. I owe you one, Kondou-san."

"But just for today. Come tomorrow, it's unavoidable that it'll be all over the news."

“I think that will be fine. If it’s Kyouko-san, she’ll find the manuscript within the day and put an end to the event.”

“You sound confident.”

Kondou-san gave a strained laugh. Sure enough, when I wasn’t referring to myself, it was comical for me to give such a strong guarantee… especially when Kyouko-san was by no means the best detective I knew. She wasn’t even operating as a detective today… but regardless. This is something different from trust… then what was the right word for it?

“But Yakusuke. That leaves just one problem.”

“What is it, Kondou-san.”

“If we’re having her participate in the manuscript search as nothing more than a game, I’ll only be able to pay your travel fees. Even when it’s a real job… this is an accounting problem that won’t simply be resolved by Okitegami-san forgetting it.”

“Ah, in regards to that point, I do have a suggestion.”

I said. All while the face of Kyouko-san- more cheerful than I had ever seen her- surfaced in my head.

“If Kyouko-san finds the manuscript, let her be the first one to read it… that should be more a reward than anything.”

6

What we were handed upon our arrival was a rough sketch of the villa. On the back side it what seemed to be Sunaga-sensei's own handwriting, four hints were spelled out.

'1. The manuscript for this work can be read out in approximately 120 minutes.'

'2. It is hidden in a delicate place. Please search with the utmost care.'

'3. Instead of searching for what is there, try searching for what is not.'

'4. '

... The fourth hint was erased with white correction tape. Was it revoked? As I questioned it, Kyouko-san held the map-side up to the light to read what had been whited out.

"It says, 'You might need a pencil'... might, this is quite a vague hint. Is that why it was erased? Hmm..."

As she thought to herself Kyouko-san handed the map over to me. It seems she had already memorized its contents—sure enough, it wasn't a particularly large villa; there weren't many rooms so with Kyouko-san's (one-day) memory, one look might have been plenty to grasp it... that wasn't the case for me. I looked over it a few times.

There were four main rooms... the dining room, study, media room, and bedroom. Additionally, a bathroom, shower and kitchen... but as the hidden item was a manuscript, we probably didn't have to worry about places with running water. If it got wet, it would be ruined... no, looking at the warning in hint '2', perhaps there was no guarantee. He might have purposely hidden it in a dangerous place... I had never personally met

Sunaga-sensei, so I had no way to measure out what sort of ‘playful heart’ the author had.

… Once I had finished my call with Kondou-san, I returned to my seat on the train car, and informed Kyouko-san that Sunaga-sensei had urgent business to attend to, so he wouldn’t be present during the manuscript search. I thought that alone might put her down, but it wasn’t to the level I expected, more so, “Then we’ll have to find the manuscript without any additional hints,” Kyouko-san seemed motivated all of a sudden.

Come to think of it, she didn’t want a signature, and perhaps Kyouko-san was the sort of reader who placed more weight on the work than the author… in that case, what I had arbitrarily decided in, the right to be the first to read Sunaga-sensei’s unpublished manuscript might be an exceedingly appropriate reward.

After that, Kondou-san came to the station to get us, taking us to Sunaga-sensei’s villa by car… there was no one at the villa. The late Sunaga-sensei’s remains had been taken to the hospital by the villa’s caretaker, and his editor Konaka… meaning the three of us had come to an empty manor that had lost its master. Naturally, I’m sure Kondou-san had arranged it that way to make it easier for Kyouko-san to search for ‘fun’.

“If you drag it on too long, his bereaved family that directly made for the hospital might return here… so you really don’t have any time, Yakusuke.”

I lent my ear to Kondou-san’s whisper… I don’t think a time limit would be that much of a hindrance to the fastest detective Kyouko-san, but…

“Well, staying here and thinking won’t get us far. It’s a game, so brooding around with a long face is boring. For now, let’s get moving, Kakushidate-san. We’ll split up and start with a rough search of the villa.”

Kyouko-san proposed… she seemed like she was having fun. She was completely in a playful mood. Seeing her innocent smile, “I get how you feel, just a bit,” Kondou-san said.

“Okitegami-san’s expression is completely different from when she’s in the maelstrom of a case.”

“Yeah… though it’s still a deceit.”

But today’s Kyouko-san’s vivaciousness was enough to write off that feeling of guilt. If the unpublished manuscript (actually posthumous work) was found and she got the right to be the first reader as a present, then as Kondou-san said, her tensions might rise even further… well, being able to read it even before the editor might be an unexpected joy to a zealous reader.

“Then the rest is up to you. Break a leg,” Kondou-san told me, entrusting me the key as he parted from the villa… he didn’t declare it, but he was naturally going to the hospital… and like that, the game began.

There was only one map, so I was to carry it with me… Kyouko-san would start from the first floor, me from the second. On the second floor were the study and media room. It might have been a weak basis beyond simple, but if it was a manuscript we were searching for, I decided to start my search from the study.

The first step in and I was already surprised.

The solemn bookshelves that towered over all four sides, the tightly-packed contents… it didn’t give off the image of a study, but it wasn’t inhuman enough to call an archive. Therefore, I thought a library was the best way to put it. So this much material was needed to write a novel… I thought, but on a closer inspection of the large quantity of books crammed in, while there were lexicons and technical books, photo albums as well, a large majority of them were just reading material.

It did seem Sunaga-sensei was quite a reader himself… but just how much time would it take to finish all the books in this room?

“…”

A lifetime, perhaps…

The thought made me a little sentimental.

The books lining the room weren't simple indexes… they were the record of a single author, a single person's life. They say that knowing one's reading list means to know what sort of person they were, but… these shelves were too awe-inspiring for the likes of a youngster like me to touch on a moment's notice.

Of course, I couldn't just stand around.

If the books he read were his record, the ones he wrote were as well… I won't deny that making Kyouko-san happy was my top priority, but that didn't mean to say I didn't feel something similar to a sense of duty to find Sunaga-sensei's last work. Even if it wasn't to the same level as Kondou-san's, I properly possessed it.

Still, with so many books, if I wanted to investigate them one by one, then just looking around the shelves would bring an end to the day… I just needed some suggestion that would lead to a deduction. And it was there that I noticed one of the bookshelves, a single shelf placed beside the large work-desk was lined with nothing but Sunaga-sensei's writings.

First prints and paperbacks, reprints, collector's editions, and cheap mainstream hardcovers, among the different book formats there were some doubles so I couldn't say it conclusively, but it was overwhelming for him to be able to fill a towering bookshelf with nothing but his own works… and I once more felt the life Sunaga-sensei lived.

… Was it possible that he had the manuscript bound so he could mix it in with the others?

It was something anyone could hit upon, but with those shallow thoughts, I started my investigation from the bookshelf… however, by that search, the fundamental truth finally came to my head that we had no idea 'what state' the manuscript hidden in the villa was in.

An author who's been… who had been writing for a long time, I somewhat got the impression of a handwritten manuscript… even if it wasn't, I had expected it to be in paper form, but that was no more than a preconceived notion, and there was no guarantee that would be the case. Rather, wasn't the probability it wasn't higher?

As truth would have it, there was a laptop PC on the desk of the study. This was a villa, and I doubt Sunaga-sensei used it to write up his manuscript, but… just like with the Sarashina Research institute a while back, perhaps he preserved his novel's data on an SD card and hid it somewhere. Even if it wasn't SD, it could be a USB or CD-ROM; possibly as in Satoi-sensei's case, it was considerable that only the password to a cloud account the file was uploaded on was written down somewhere in the villa.

It was thoughtless of me, I should've confirmed that with Kondou-san… if I made a call to him now, I might be able to find out what form his past manuscripts were hidden in, but now that the game had begun, I got the feeling that asking him now would be unfair. If it really came down to it, it might become unavoidable, but preserving that level of difficulty might just let Kyouko-san feel the treasure-hunt to be more worthwhile.

"Still…"

I reached out my hand and pulled out a single volume… The Great Detective Meiko's Case Log, by Sunaga Hirubee.

It was the first volume of Sunaga-sensei's mystery series directed at children, and I'd read it in elementary school… rather, a majority of Sunaga-sensei's books I've read came from the Great Detective Meiko Series. The illustrations and short paragraphs made it juvenile by all accounts, but thinking back on its contents, it was such a satire of the mystery genre I couldn't even imagine it was geared towards children. On one hand, I guess I could say it was fitting of Sunaga-sensei after he'd written so many mysteries dealing with the social issues of his time, or rather… my nostalgia was similar to the embarrassment I'd feel after looking at a photo from my childhood.

What I had forgotten. What I'd remembered. I see, so while learning new information and going through new experiences is pleasant, at the same time, the act of recalling forgotten knowledge and experiences is also just as… comforting.

… This is yet another topic I have to be careful not to turn towards Kyouko-san, who can't recall any memories she's lost. It was definitely a feeling she couldn't sympathize with.

Come to think of it, just how many of these lines of Sunaga-sensei books did Kyouko-san remember? New releases after a certain point would be forgotten even if she read them, but…

"Kakushidate-san, have you found anything?"

It was right at that moment a voice called from behind… it was Kyouko-san. As expected of the fastest detective, she had swiftly finished her search of the first floor and risen to the second. Looking at it the other way, the fact she had come up meant she hadn't discovered anything on the first floor… but, the number of books was overwhelming, and as a dullard who hadn't even begun his full-blown investigations, I could only cringe.

"U-um…"

"Wah! What a wonderful room! It totally says Sunaga-sensei!"

Her eyes sparkling like a teenage girl (without ever turning those eyes to a confused me), Kyouko-san turned in a circle to survey the study.

"I'd love to live here!"

"T… though if an earthquake came, it would be the worst place to be"

I tried my hardest to join in on the conversation, but as if I'd poured water on her passions, she gave me a look as if to say, 'What boorish things could this oversized oaf be saying'.

"It's my lifelong ambition to die buried up by books."

She said. It was something I could only hear because her tensions were high, the playful joke of a literary woman.

"Ah, when I say lifelong ambition, I don't mean it like that."

She bashfully explained… how cute.

Well, if the shelves really did fall over, and she was dying under the books, I doubt she would say it… luckily, Sunaga-sensei peacefully breathed his last breath in his bedroom.

"At present, I haven't found anything."

Getting back on track, I gave a report.

"Eh? Is that so? That's a surprise…"

Kyouko-san perplexedly tilted her head.

"If it was anywhere, I thought it would be with you…"

"?"

I tried deciphering the meaning of those words for a moment, but I can only presume in the desire to look through every nook and cranny of her beloved Sunaga-sensei's villa, she had purposely chosen to start her search from the place it was least likely to be (i.e. the first floor).

Well, sure enough, if the manuscript is found, then that's when the game ends… I guess a wide-coverage playstyle starting with eliminating the impossible was a valid strategy, but it was definitely a detour work-mode Kyouko-san would never take. In this one day, I had seen quite a bit of a side of Kyouko-san I had never known about. Thinking of the value of Sunaga-sensei's posthumous manuscript, I shouldn't be saying something so carefree, but I really must be thankful to Kondou-san.

To Kyouko-san, me not finding any clues would conveniently extend the game time, "Then let me join you," she lined up next to me.

"There are loads of titles I don't know. But I really don't have the time to read through them…"

Looking at the lines of Sunaga-sensei's works, Kyouko-san spoke in disappointment… trying to be considerate in my phrasing, "I haven't even read half of them, but… Kyouko-san, to about where have you read?" I posed the question. The actual number I'd read didn't even come close to half.

"Well let's see– whoops."

On the verge of saying it, Kyouko-san shut her mouth.

"Ah, that was close, we can't be having that. I don't remember any books beyond a certain point, so if I tell you that, you'll be able to figure out when I started losing my memory, or at least as far as I remember. That's a trade secret."

"I-is that so. I'm sorry for asking such a strange question."

I hurriedly apologized… I wasn't particularly trying to probe.

"Aha, I don't mind it, today I'm on private business. If you want an answer within the scope I'm free to speak upon, I guess I've read at least half."

“Oh? So you have?”

That was a bit surprising… since I heard she was a die-hard fan, it wouldn’t be strange if she said she read them all up to a ‘certain’ point, but her answer was too vague.

“At the point I got hooked, there were already quite a few books that were difficult to find. It all comes down to the era… but I’m happy to hear that Sunaga-sensei is still contributing as vigorously as I remember. Just looking at how many new books he’s put out.”

“…”

Sunaga-sensei wasn’t contributing anymore.

He was called to heaven for a quiet rest.

I was the one who decided to cover the information up; I couldn’t give a strange reaction lest the truth be revealed, but that being the case, keeping silent would be unnatural so, “S-still… I wonder how Sunaga-sensei was able to write so many books,” I said something extremely boorish once more.

“After putting out so many hits, at some point along the way, I’ve done enough, I don’t have to write anymore. If it were me, I’m sure I’d get to thinking it.”

“Hah?”

As expected, she gave me a suspicious look.

No, perhaps I should call it a surprise… even more than her cheerful smile, for Kyouko-san who placed weight on confronting people as a working member of society, this was a face I could only see in private.

“What are you talking about, Kakushidate-san? It’s only natural for an author to keep writing books.”

“No, um, what I’m trying to say is… after earning so much he wouldn’t have to work another day in his life to put food on the table, wouldn’t he lose his professional motivation… I spoke with Kondou-san about it the other day, but being a writer is apparently a job that’s easy to retire from…”

Even as I abruptly apologized, I regretted that I’d poured oil on the flames… perhaps she drew the conclusion I was a fool who measured the artistic merits of authorship by monetary value alone. But Kyouko-san was someone who boasted a firm sense for money one might say went too far, so without any anger,

“Well, it’s true there are authors like that out there… once they’ve run out of things they want to write, once they no longer need to write, perhaps it’s simply time to put down the pen.”

She gave a level answer.

“Of course, it’s not like all of Sunaga-sensei’s works were hits or anything.”

“Is that so?”

Come to think of it, she did just say there were a number of books that were difficult to obtain… the talk was now going towards how he worked without much expectations. I felt like I had exposed my own shallow despicableness.

At present, I was unemployed, so I couldn’t help but think of such things… in that sense (And this was also a common worry, but), while I was searching for Sunaga-sensei’s posthumous manuscript with Kyouko-san, I had paid no heed to the trouble this might cause to his bereaved family who’d inherit his assets.

“Come to think of it, was Sunaga-sensei married?”

“… Kakushidate-san, I see you don’t know the first thing about Sunaga-sensei.”

It was finally about time for her to be fed up with me.

It was honestly unexpected on my part for her to look at me with those eyes.

“He was not. Sunaga-sensei is a man of his work. He keeps up an image as if his whole being was devoted to mystery novels, and I quite respect that part of him.”

Which means the one who’ll inherit his belongings will be a sibling or something of the sort. No, thinking of the current average life expectancy, his parent might even still be alive.

“B-but it’s possible you’ve just forgotten, and he had been married quite recently.”

While it was faint, given his age, the possibility was there… and if such a thing happened, there might be quite a quarrel over his inheritance.

“Sunaga-sensei alone would never partake in such a thing.”

Kyouko-san strongly declared. Rather than a detective’s deduction, it practically sounded like a young teenage girl’s conviction that an idol can’t have a boyfriend, but…

“… Oh. Could it be that you’re married, Kakushidate-san? In that case, I apologize, I got a bit emotional there. I wasn’t trying to deny the idea of a married life in itself.”

“N-no. I’m single.”

“Oh, is that so. Then pardon my rudeness… I guess it would’ve been rude either way. Ehehe. Do you have any such plans.”

“Nothing in particular…”

“But at your age, it’s about time for the person you’re dating to place such expectations on you. They must already trust you considerably. Otherwise they’d be angry at you for going on a trip with someone like me on your day off.”

“I don’t have anyone I’m going out with…”

I felt like a culprit cornered into a confession.

Or rather, as I thought, Kyouko-san did not recognize this as a date after all… though it couldn’t be helped, given the way I invited her.

“What’s this, I see you’re a man of your work as well. How wonderful.”

“A-and what about you, Kyouko-san?”

A man of my work? I’m currently unemployed.

But it’s not like I returned the question to cover up my lack of employment… whether Kyouko-san had a significant other or not, I’d wanted to ask it for a while.

If Kyouko-san did have a sweetheart, then this date Kondou-san set up would be a complete farce… if I asked it out of the blue, it might come off as sexual harassment, but if I simply turned back what was asked of me, then surely it was safe. And so I brandished a nonexistent courage.

“I’m also a woman of my work. I don’t have any plan of starting a household in this lifetime.”

Kyouko-san indifferently answered.

“I mean, even if I fall in love with someone, I’ll soon forget all about it.”

7

“Now then, about Sunaga-sensei’s manuscript, let’s stop thinking about all the unnecessary stuff and apply Occam’s Razor. If it was digitalized and stored on an IC chip, it would be possible to hide in any small gap in the walls or ceiling, but I don’t think Sunaga-sensei would do something like that. The reason being this is a game, and the person who set it up was a mystery author. The answer should be a hiding place that makes you slap your knee and say, ‘so that’s where it was!’. If at the end of the game, the player told him, ‘there’s no way we’d find it in a place like that,’ it would be a major buzzkill of an ending.”

Kyouko-san suddenly entered detective mode… even if it was her day off, perhaps she thought an ‘unknown man’ was conversing too familiarly with her so she switched over.

I can’t deny her change was a relief to me. Kyouko-san’s private life… forget that, it seems I had intruded on her personal space, and that gave me a greater sense of guilt than making her thing work was a game.

If I reported that fecklessness, I’m sure Kondou-san would scold me. With such measly resolve, I never should have invited Kyouko-san out for a date, he would say… but at this very moment, I could only go along with her talk.

“Then the manuscript… should we assume it’s been put down on paper? Though I don’t know what medium Sunaga-sensei generally used to write.”

“Sunaga’s writing uses the olden style of fountain pen and writing paper…”

Kyouko-san informed me of a tidbit I didn’t know about… but after that, she of course corrected herself as she took a glance at the laptop on the desk.

"... But I'm sure after penning it down, he could easily digitize it, and as long as it's in a form us readers will be satisfied with, there is no guarantee it has to remain in a paper state. Meaning in the end, reaching the answer through his hints seems like the shortest route."

After purposely taking a detour, Kyouko-san brazenly said such a thing... hearing that, I took out the map in my pocket and checked out the four hints once more.

'1. The manuscript for this work can be read out in approximately 120 minutes.'

'2. It is hidden in a delicate place. Please search with the utmost care.'

'3. Instead of searching for what is there, try searching for what is not.'

'4. '

If the fourth hint was supposed to be erased, that leaves us with three... or does it? If you'll let me unravel my personal opinion, they weren't coded or anything, meaning we should take them as hints pure and simple...

"One hundred and twenty minutes, but even if he says it's a quantity you can read in two hours, the number of pages that can be read in two hours varies from person to person. If it were me, around a hundred pages of paperback..."

Though it also depended on the layout, and if it was one hundred pages by book, then converting that to handwritten would give one fifty pages, perhaps? If it was on written paper, it would have a moderate thickness... it wouldn't be that easy to hide.

"On the contrary, if it's been digitized, then giving us the length as a hint would be irrelevant, wouldn't it Kyouko-san? Meaning if hint 1 deals with the quantity of manuscript papers, then the likelihood it's been hidden in paper format is high... by the way, Kyouko-san, how much would you be able to read in two hours?"

“With two whole hours, I can read through most books.”

As if to demonstrate, Kyouko-san pulled a single book titled, ‘The Golden Rule of Theft’ from the shelf and started reading through it… sure enough, on the journey here, Kyouko-san did finish a book from start to finish after all. It seems the fastest detective was also a speedy reader. Speed reading… is apparently a special technique different from reading, so I don’t think that’s it, but the speed one could read a book greatly varied from person to person.

But even so, it was possible to set some extremities.

It wasn’t a short story of fifty pages, and it couldn’t be a long epic spanning a thousand. We had to search for a book with a sensible thickness.

“Hah. Well, you could interpret it like that… I guess.”

Kyouko-san conceded… she was somewhat restless, but did she have some objection? I managed to gain some tentative endorsement so I started considering hint number 2.

“When he said a delicate place, what do you think he meant? At first, I thought that might mean someplace with circulating water.”

“Yes, but if you consider how this is simply an expression of his playful heart as an author, I get the feeling hiding it in a bathroom, kitchen, bath or washbasin would be just a bit too dangerous.”

“Isn’t that precisely why it would be a surprise?”

“Let’s say for example you were his editor, Kakushidate-san. Would you hold a favorable impression of an author who preserved his manuscript in a toilet’s tank?”

“…”

That was an intuitive problem I had little to say to… but as long as he was an author, I definitely do think he would treat his own manuscript with care. The manuscript search should be a 'treasure' hunt for the one hiding it as well. Even more so, considering the original target of the game was the editor.

Then what could delicate mean… if he meant mentally, then was it the bedroom? Among all private spaces, it should normally be the hardest to let other people enter, so you could call it a 'delicate'room.

But as long as Kyouko-san investigated and concluded it wasn't there, the first floor rooms… perhaps it's alright if I think it's not in the dining and bedroom. Even if it was there, it would be beyond my power to find it. There's no way I could find something Kyouko-san couldn't…

"Hint 3 is practically like saying nothing at all. 'Instead of searching for what is there, try searching for what is not'… To me, it just seems like the grand principle of a treasure hunt. Even the fourth hint covered up with corrective tape looks more useful."

"You might… need a pencil. Was it? But from what I saw on the first floor, and this study as well, there wasn't a single normal pencil to be found. Nothing but mechanical pencils."

Kyouko-san crossed her arms.

Perhaps Kyouko-san already had some sort of theory, or so I had my hopes, but it seems she hadn't reached that stage yet… As expected of a treasured mystery author. Just because she's a great detective, I see he didn't hit her with a trick she could instantly see through. Of course, there was a difference in intent between an actual criminal case and a fabricated game, but… is it like how a seasoned chess player can't always win against a computer opponent?

In that case, this is a little troublesome. To this point, I had moved forcefully under the premise that Kyouko-san would definitely find the manuscript, and I had never anticipated a pattern where she couldn't find it at all

I had asked so much from Kondou-san, so in that case, I'd have no choice but to take responsibility, and call the most proficient detective registered in my phone, a true omnipotent detective with a hundred percent crime resolution rate… I wasn't up for that.

"Now this is troublesome."

So said Kyouko-san.

"It doesn't seem to be in this study… and if it's not in the dining, the bedroom, the stury, or the media room, then by process of elimination, we will have no option but to search the bathroom and kitchen."

"Eh? No, Kyouko-san, I haven't searched the media room yet."

"Say what?"

Kyouko-san raised her face.

She seemed fundamentally surprised… it seems Kyouko-san had come under the misunderstanding I had already finished searching the media room, conducting my search on the study afterwards.

How should I put it, she thinks too highly of me. Well, since she had managed to investigate two rooms on the first floor before climbing the stairs, naturally, by the time she found me in the study, I must have finished searching at least one room; perhaps it was an appropriate assumption… unfortunately, I wasn't that skillful. If she thinks everyone's speedy, she's way off. I hadn't laid a single hand on the media room yet.

"What are you even doing, Kakushidate-san… why did you put off the most suspicious place of all…"

When Kyouko-san purposely took a detour to enjoy searching the villa through and through, I don't remember doing anything to warrant her chastising me so… but the most suspicious place of all? The media room?

No matter how you look at it, the study is the more suspicious place to hide a manuscript, or rather, I thought it the most fitting place…

"Then off we go… if you line up just these four hints, Sunaga-sensei was clearly indicating the media room. I could tell that from the start."

Kyouko-san said as she left the study without waiting for my reaction- I frantically gave chase. It was difficult to say I'd seen my fill of the study, but… for some reason, it seemed like Kyouko-san had been hurrying for a while now. No, this was different from hurrying. From my eyes, that was the usual Kyouko-san: the fastest detective, Okitegami Kyouko.

A professional detective by trade.

But to Kyouko-san, today was a vacation, and one she should use to play… was there some change to her mental state? I get the feeling the most appropriate conclusion was that she had finally had enough of my stupidity, but… that was simply too sad.

By the time I caught up to Kyouko-san, the fastest detective was already searching around. Her flow was so lacking in waste that even if I wanted to help, I wouldn't know where to start. More so, if my large build beyond my own control treads into the room, I would be in the way. I stood at attention in the doorway, only able to watch over her.

No, even without the just cause of not getting in her way, I'm sure I'd hesitate for more than a moment to enter the room… That was simply how polished of a media room it was.

It was a masterpiece in a different sense from the study. State-of-the-art playback devices, and soundproofing, it was entirely a music studio—I should've guessed from the fact a media room was built into a villa, but was music appreciation Sunaga-sensei's hobby? I'm sure it would be comfortable to listen to music from the sofa stationed in the center of the room… his hard side was akin to stone, and his soft side was just as fulfilled.

If the books crammed into the bookshelves lining the circumference of his study were the record of his readership, then the racks that filled up the room walls had to be his music record… records, cassette tapes, CDs, MDs, they were all systematically shelved in rows. A large music box and jukebox, even what looked like karaoke equipment was lying around, so rather than a simple media room, I would call it a music museum. Did Sunaga-sensei have a collector side to him, I wonder?

If the situation wasn't what it was, even an uncultured man like me would love to hear a tune through his system, perhaps I might have even thought to listen to some uncharacteristic classical music. But, simply, at that very moment, no matter how tidy he kept things, the 'plentiful stock' was only a hindrance to a search.

Still, why did Kyouko-san place more weight on this room than the study… even If I think back on it, as long as the hidden item is a manuscript, I can't think my thought it was concealed in the study could be too off the mark.

"Ah… no, could it be…"

Or so it hit me.

"Did he dictate… his work?"

Ever since the spread of word processing, you rarely ever hear about it, but among old authors, it was a known writing method… to speak out the contents of the novel, record it, and have a specialist print it out.

While Sunaga-sensei used a fountain pen and paper, from the length of his career, I highly doubt he never learned the technique to dictate… so was it possible he recorded his own voice to a storage medium and preserved it somewhere in this room?

"Then the one hundred twenty minutes wasn't about us readers reading it, it was about the author speaking out the novel in his head…"

“No, I doubt that.”

So short and to the point, Kyouko-san denied my train of thought… crawling on all fours across the carpeted floor, without even turning to me, she inspected a rack. Her short pants helped to give that pose an innate nature that drew the layman’s eye.

“If he dictated an entire novel, it couldn’t simply be contained in one hundred and twenty minutes. In that timeframe, the most he could read out would be a novella.”

“… You’re right. Then… but, if for example, he just recorded the ID and password for a cloud account, then couldn’t it be possible?”

“Cloud? Is something up with the weather?”

Kyouko-san did turn to me at that one. As she turned to face me on all fours, it just made it unreasonably sexier, but averting my eyes made me feel even more indecent, so I feigned composure, remember the last case… I was about to say, but today’s Kyouko-san didn’t know the last case, and she had no way to know.

So I gave just a simple explanation in regards to the cloud.

“I doubt that’s it either. In that case, as a matter of fact, the contents of the manuscript would be ‘outside’ the villa… that goes against the rules of the game. I can’t accept it.”

“I see… but is there really an answer you’ll accept? I’m not trying to grumble, but I really think we have too few hints after all.”

“No, we have too many. That Sunaga-sensei, since he was dealing with his editor instead of the readers, perhaps he held back. In this case, having fewer hints would make for a better challenge.”

Kyouko-san turned her eyes back to the rack, searching as she spoke. Since that's where she was searching, then rather than the playback equipment, I do think she was paying more attention to the recordings after all, but… what was Kyouko-san's current goal? For some reason, it seems she quit beating around the bush…

"But in truth, Kakushidate-san, you brought up a good approach."

That gentle yet blunt approach truly belonged to detective-mode Kyouko-san. Not as Okitegami Kyouko the individual, but as the head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko.

"This is exceedingly regrettable. Even without my cooperation, if you continued to search on your own, you'd probably find it eventually."

"I-I see… I really don't think so. In the first place, I'm still doubtful whether the manuscript is even there in the first–"

"Yep, here it is."

And there, Kyouko-san interrupted me… taking a certain something from the rack, she held it out to me.

A certain something.

And a surprising something indeed.

8

It was a cassette tape.

A cassette tape that was kept on the rack.

To start off, it had been quite a long time since a cassette tape itself entered my eyes, but unlike records, cassette tapes are still apparently serving active duty, so they shouldn't be too rare.

If I recall correctly, the proper term is compact cassette. But whatever the official name is, I couldn't understand the reason she would pull one out.

There was no label stuck over the case or the cassette itself; why had Kyouko-san taken out an unbranded cassette here… when I heard her say, 'here it is', I had grown excited, thinking she had surely found Sunaga-sensei's manuscript, but was she referring to something else? Like finding a hint to its hiding place, or perhaps spotting something rare that was completely irrelevant? Is that what she meant.

But Kyouko-san,

"And that's the end of the game. Good work everyone."

She stood… the way she smiled belonged to a detective who had finished solving a mystery.

"Wa… wait a second, Kyouko-san. Even if you take out an incomprehensible tape and declare game set match, I can't accept it. I can't reciprocate your 'good work'. Please properly explain it. And prove it."

"It will be difficult to prove here."

As I mouthed a side character's lines, Kyouko-san showed some unexpected modesty. But of course, "Though just explaining would be easy," she continued on like a lead role.

"For example… the fourth hint was erased, wasn't it?"

"That's right. But what about it? A cassette tape and pencil don't have any relationship."

"The fact that the wording wasn't erased with white-out but correction tape was one hint. Correction tape. Its inside structure is the same as a cassette's, and they're both tape."

"Oh… t-that's right."

Now that she mentions it… but unless she said that, I wouldn't think of connecting a cassette tape with correction tape. Even if they were similar, I wouldn't say they bore a resemblance. That didn't change the fact it was weak as a hint.

"The 'You might need a pencil' part erased by the correction tape was also a hint. With cassette tapes, look."

Taking it out of its case, Kyouko-san pointed at the two open holes in the center of the cassette.

"When you want to adjust the time on the tape, you stick a pencil in that hole and turn it, don't you… round and round."

"…"

Even if she explained it, it wasn't sitting right. Perhaps that custom used to exist, but even if you didn't have a pencil, I'm sure you could use a pinky… or so I thought, but if you told me that was precisely why the hint was erased in the first place, I could accept it.

“Then Kyouko-san, is it because you saw that the fourth hint indicated a cassette tape that you appraised this media room as the most suspicious?”

“No way. Just associating that sentence and the use of correction tape to a cassette tape would be a stretch for me. I just used hint number four as the icing on my reasoning… and it goes without saying the number one hint was hint number one.”

“Even if you declare it goes without saying… I won’t understand unless you go and say it.”

“Look, it’s written right here, isn’t it?”

Kyouko-san showed me the ‘120’ directly printed onto the unlabeled cassette tape. Those numbers meant that the tape could record one hundred twenty minutes of music…

“Eh? You can’t tell me that’s all. Because there was a hint that said you could finish reading in one twenty minutes, you chose a 120 tape…”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Kyouko-san nodded with an innocent face.

“The reason I was looking all over the rack was to see if there was any other cassette tape capable of recording one hundred and twenty minutes. But the tapes on this shelf are nothing but 45, 60, and 90-minute cassettes, and there was only one 120 minute one. By the way, CDs and MDs do not have one twenty minute variants in the first place. That’s why I was able to identify this cassette tape as the manuscript we are looking for.”

“R-really.”

What’s up with Kyouko-san? I succumbed to my anxiety… just a moment ago, Kyouko-san was the one who said it was impossible to record the

contents of a single novel in one hundred and twenty minutes. It can't be that she's forgotten it? Kyouko-san's memory is reset every time she goes to sleep… on the other hand, up to the moment she goes to bed, she's supposed to boast a memory greater than the average person, but could it be her symptoms are worsening? In that case, this isn't the time for deductions or treasure hunts, I have to get her to the hospital ASAP…

"K-Kyouko-san… please get a grip. Didn't you say it yourself it would be impossible to dictate?"

"Yes, I said it. It was not dictated."

As I said it to confirm, Kyouko-san assented… good, so it seems she hasn't lost her memory.

"No matter how fast one speaks, recording one novel's worth in one twenty minutes would be impossible… their tongue would wear out too."

"That's right."

"But on the other hand… you don't have to. Why do it when a cassette tape can already store a whole novel?"

"W-what?"

Just as I rejoiced that Kyouko-san hadn't lost her memory, the fact only served to increase my confusion. Storing neither a reading of the novel, nor a password… and yet how was she saying that cassette tape was Sunaga-sensei's manuscript?

"Well let's see. Then in exchange for teaching me new information on the cloud, Kakushidate-san, let me teach you an old tidbit of knowledge. These sort of cassette tapes, you know, they can store digital data as well."

9

“When you really boil it down, it’s a magnetic tape. It depends on the product, but with a 120 minute tape, it should be possible to store approximately five hundred kilobytes… with five hundred kilobytes of text data, that should total just around enough for a lengthy novel.”

As she explained it like that, I recalled… I couldn’t determine where I obtained that knowledge, but whatever the case, it was a pleasant feeling to recall it.

That’s right.

More than a quarter of a century ago, computers could run programs by reading them off of cassette tapes, I heard… while at this point, they were completely treated as a music-recording device, if you trace them to their origins, then just like compact discs and USB memory, and even the cloud, they’re a data storage media all the same.

Hint number 2’s ‘delicate place’ must have been referring to that… while you didn’t have to be so cautious when listening to music, when you look at them as a data storage medium, cassette tapes are much too frail. They’re a magnetic strip after all… fragile items that get damaged simply by every read.

“… So hint number 1 was code to say when reading it, meaning for a computer to read the data, it will take one hundred twenty minutes?”

“Since it doesn’t have to do with sound, there’s no way it actually takes one twenty minutes to read, but it looks like you’ve got the gist of it.”

“T-then what does hint number 3 mean?”

“Search for what isn’t there. I think that means that a device capable of reading this tape- a so-called data recorder- is not inside the villa. That is

why I said I would be unable to prove it… well, if he left an antique computer able to read cassette tapes around, it would be a dead giveaway."

That was certainly true.

When he was a handwriting author, the fact a laptop was placed on his study desk might have been an indirect message from Sunaga-sensei… and in fact, upon seeing it, I gained the notion the manuscript might have been digitized. The fact he wrote out 120 minutes instead of two hours might have been the biggest hint… if it was just simple data, a compact disk would be able to store it, so to specify the answer was a cassette tape, he emphasized the number.

But to think he stored the manuscript on a cassette tape, it was too far beyond my expectations… what's more, it was certainly an answer I could accept. Once I knew the answer, I could only nod at Kyouko-san's protest that he had given too many hints. It was too blatant. For Kyouko-san, just looking at hint number 1 and the fact there was a media room on the map was enough to arrive at the answer.

I felt like I could hear Sunaga-sensei's grand laugh… no, I don't know if Sunaga-sensei was the sort to give a grand laugh, but whatever the case, when I had missed the mark and loitered around the study, I had a strong sense I'd been bamboozled by a great author. Likely seeing through my shame at my own ignorance, Kyouko-san tried cheering me up.

"Well, my memory is renewed at a certain point. I'm sure I had the advantage in dragging up old information about cassette tapes."

She said… and of course, that was true, but it wasn't as if Kyouko-san lived through an era where cassette tapes were used as a data storage medium in real time.

I really should praise Kyouko-san's disposition as a detective here… or so I thought, but Kyouko-san wasn't omnipotent after all. Perhaps relieved she had finished the job, at the end of the end, she made an unthinkable mistake. Putting the cassette tape back in its case and handing it to me.

“Yes, and I leave the rest to you, Kakushidate-san. This is Sunaga-sensei’s unpublished manuscript you’ve been searching for… with the time it will take to print out, I doubt I’ll receive instant payment, but you’d better honor your promise to let me be the first one to read it, okay? I don’t think they’re in production anymore, but if with a publisher’s connection, they should be able to find at least one data recorder. And even if they don’t track one down, if they look through what Sunaga-sensei left behind, they should be able to find what was used to produce this record in the first place…”

Said Kyouko-san.

“You’re right.”

I accepted it… and found myself in shock.

“What he… left behind?”

“Ah.”

Kyouko-san covered her mouth.

But it was already too late.

“You… you noticed? Kyouko-san. The fact that Sunaga-sensei passed–”

“…”

Kyouko-san awkwardly averted her eyes in silence… but with her reaction and her lack of questions for me, she was giving way too many hints.

10

Another day, at a café near Sakusousha, I met up with Kondou-san… in order to accept Sunaga Hirubee's final manuscript he had printed out. Delivering the manuscript to Kyouko-san would be my role… I'm sure he was suspicious at my terrible reaction when he gave me another excuse to see Kyouko-san, as Kondou-san cross-examined me and- as a result- I had no choice but to speak about the disaster I had kept my lips sealed on.

"Then Yakusuke. Does that mean Okitegami-san saw through your lie from the start?"

"No, she noticed along the way, apparently. That's why she suddenly entered detective mode… rather, she dropped her roundabout all-encompassing playstyle and started taking the game seriously."

Realizing the manuscript she was currently searching for would be Sunaga-sensei's posthumous work, the serious level changed within Kyouko-san in regards to the game- and once that happened, it was over in no time. Let me say I saw the work of a professional. And in contrast, I was generously an amateur at best.

"When I spoke with Kyouko-san about Sunaga-sensei in the study, it seems I referred to him in the past tense a number of times without realizing it… apparently, that's when it hit her. When she was searching through the bedroom where Sunaga-sensei passed, perhaps she sensed something was off as well. And even if that wasn't the case, before the game started, she might have thought something was suspicious of my and your behavior, but looking at the result…"

"I see… well, don't be so down, Yakusuke. It's not like it's your fault. Deceiving a great detective is something fundamentally impossible for anyone out there."

"Sorry to turn down your words of consolation, but Kondou-san, that's not the point I'm embarrassed about. It's not the fact I told a childish lie…

after she noticed Sunaga-sensei's death, the way Kyouko-san continued pretending to be deceived by my lie is so embarrassing I don't know what to do with myself."

When I thought I was being considerate, she took me into consideration.

It was an outrageous shameful display.

It must have been quite the shock to learn of the death of an author she was a huge fan of, but not showing it on the surface in the slightest, playing oblivious, Kyouko-san continued the game… instead of being considerate, she was completely justified to be enraged at me for deceiving her.

… But I could no longer apologize for it.

A few days had passed, the memories of that day reset, and my deceit had, within Kyouko-san's head, never happened at all… even this manuscript, to Kyouko-san, she wouldn't really know the reason she was accepting it, so it might just become a mysterious surprise present.

Kyouko-san's memories were far more delicate than a magnetic strip.

No… should I say easier to delete.

Because even this discord doesn't even exist within her.

"Can't you be honestly happy that Okitegami-san tried to look out for you? I'm sure she was just happy to receive your concern. Just think of it as accepting her return gift."

"That's one way to look at it, but… this is too awkward."

Though I was just one-sidedly holding onto this awkwardness…

If possible, I wanted to finish my business with this unpublished manuscript through the mail.

"… But this is troubling. If you're like that, then it's a bit difficult to make a request. I guess I'll give up for today, we can do it some other time."

"? What is it, Kondou-san? Did you have something you wanted me to do besides delivering this manuscript? In that case, don't be so distant. Don't worry about my spirit, ask whatever you want to infinity. It's possible that might just clear up my head."

"No, because you see, this is also something that involves Kyouko-san, so… I thought I would have you make a request to her while you were delivering this manuscript."

"A request?"

"Yeah. This time, it's without any exaggeration, a job for a detective. It's about Sunaga-sensei, whose funeral was held the other day… truth be told, a suspicious point has come up in regards to his death."

(Are you Free, Kyouko-san– Case Forgotten)

Chapter 4:

Pardon me, Kyouko-san

1

In hindsight, I've never pressed the stop button on the bus. Even when approaching the stop I wanted to get down on, each time I would wait for someone else to hold out their hand. And as that went on, I would start to wonder whether I really wanted to get off at all; could it be I needed someone to give me a push on the back- to press that button for me? I could no longer tell.

Without moving assertively, moving actively, simply waiting for a someone to make their move… I wished to be swept up in the flow. It's just a stop button we're talking about here, laugh as you will, but that just may be the event that best represents the reality of my life. For the bus stop of someone like me who can only ever take standard actions, to start off with, I was never the only one who needed to get off, so that fact has never troubled me. But in the case that no other person pressed the stop button, I would be unable to get off at the bus stop I wanted, sent en route towards the next station.

There's no way that could be, if the situation came to that, then surely anyone would press the button themselves—it was easy to say, but why do you think one is able to do what they usually don't only in a state of emergency?

In everything that mattered, I was always like that.

I never moved by myself… I was a stationary person of reaction.

If you called me the type to get dragged in, of course I was. It was because I never moved on my own that I had no choice but to be dragged in.

This matter was the same… if Kondou-san never pushed me, I doubt I would ever invite Kyouko-san out for a date. And as a penalty, it became awkward between me and her… what's more, a one-side awkwardness, where I thought I wouldn't want to meet Kyouko-san for a long while; even so, once again on a job Kondou-san requested, I had boarded the bus

to make a delivery. Fundamentally, I've gotten to thinking my own will isn't a first-class article.

"Hold it right there, Kondou-san. I don't think that job's very suited for Kyouko-san… I don't mean it in a bad way, but you're better off having me call a different detective."

Of course, for argument's sake, I tried making an escape route like that, but,

"I want to ask Okitegami-san."

Or so Kondou-san remained firm.

"Why's that? I mean, Kyouko-san definitely showed an all-around grand performance in Satoi-sensei's case, and I know you might have a high evaluation of her, but Kyouko-san isn't top-class among the detectives I can introduce you by any means. I won't say she's mediocre, but there's no doubt she's a considerably unconventional. If there really is something suspicious about Sunaga-sensei's death, there should be a more appropriate detective–"

"And I think Kyouko-san is the appropriate choice… because she is Sunaga-sensei's fan."

"……?"

I couldn't immediately discern his intent, but when he asserted it so strongly, I thought that might be true. Especially when considering how Sunaga-sensei was a mystery author. This might be a form of prejudice, but from the eyes of a professional detective, a crime… a mystery novel was a fabrication through and through. 'Real detective work, real incidents are never that interesting' they'd believe, to a greater or lesser extent, some part of them looking on in disdain. While a classic masterwork was one thing, when he or she looked at a modern mystery novel from the side—perhaps I should call it a distinction that came directly from the detective occupation, but just as Kondou-san said, there

weren't too many detectives like Kyouko-san out there who could remain honest fans of mystery authors like Sunaga-sensei.

And so he ended up persuading me and as I made for Kyouko-san's detective agency the next day, I was left wondering if that really was a good enough reason to make the request to Kyouko-san.

Precisely because she was Sunaga-sensei's fan, wasn't that reason not to request this case to her… even for policemen, they don't leave the investigation to officers whose friends or family are involved in the case. Kyouko-san was put in such high spirits just by going to Sunaga-sensei's villa. In a case involving Sunaga-sensei's death, she might not be able to investigate with a level head… though I'd like to think that's impossible for a professional.

As I went through those long-winded and meaningless thoughts, someone pushed the stop button for me… I held the envelope containing the unpublished, posthumous manuscript of Sunaga Hirubee to my chest as I stood from my seat and got off the bus.

2

The Okitegami Detective Agency is the three-story building. The entire complex is entirely the house and office where Kyouko-san lives and works. It is located in an office district towering with skyscrapers so it looks cozily compact, but if you removed the background and thought of it as a single individual's personal office, buying an entire building was a conspicuously large-scale endeavor. Additionally, in its stability, it could be called a collection of state-of-the-art security systems, and among all the buildings in this office district, the Okitegami building was the most secure and exclusive.

So stands to reason.

A detective is one who brazenly steps into others' secrets, others' private lives, others' hidden circumstance, bluntly cutting them down in their wake… They can invite unjust resentment, and there are surely times the resentment is not unjustified at all. It is an occupation constantly living back to back with danger… Kyouko-san once said, 'Laying hands on the detective is against the rules', but looking at the practical problem, it isn't by any means rare a detective themselves becomes the victim of a case.

I doubt Kyouko-san was unaware of such a thing… that's precisely why this much security was necessary.

Especially in Kyouko-san's case, with an absolute observance of confidentiality as her selling point, she would cleanly forget any subject she was charged with by the next day, so she had no way of knowing how she was hated, making her completely unable to keep vigilant. Her gimmick as a detective was directly connected to risk, and as everything in life has its ups and downs, whether she was doing well for herself or not was something I couldn't quite say.

Therefore, the office that formed the headquarters of the Okitegami Detective Agency was bestowed with more security than necessary— the building was thought to have been planned out by the Kyouko-san of

someday who got the notion in her head. Her security updated constantly, day by day, practically like an anti-virus software… of course, while I speak as if I know all about it, this would only make for the third time I set foot in the Okitegami building.

When making a job request to Kyouko-san, in most cases, I was asking for salvation from the crime scene, so I rarely ever turned my feet towards the office itself… as Kyouko-san's other gimmick was as the 'fastest detective', perhaps it wasn't just me.

Whatever the case, it would be troublesome if I carelessly set foot on the premise and got bound like the first time, so I cautiously pressed the intercom button.

"Yes?"

Came Kyouko-san's voice. The Okitegami Detective Agency didn't have any employees… Kyouko-san handled receptions as well. "My name is Kakushidate Yakusuke. I spoke with you over the phone," I named myself.

"Understood. Please go ahead and enter."

Alongside Kyouko-san's voice, the door opened… it seems I succeeded in identifying myself. But it was too early to feel relieved. After that, until I could finally reach the receptions room, there were more checks than an international airport waiting for me.

If Kyouko-san ever became the victim of an incident within this building, I doubt there would never be a more difficult sealed-room murder to solve, or so I thought a thought as if I couldn't distinguish reality and fiction as I entered the building.

3

After one hour, I was finally able to have an audience with the great detective, Okitegami Kyouko-san– meaning, I was let into the reception room on the second floor, and allowed to lower myself into the sofa for clients.

While Kyouko-san brewed coffee in the adjoined kitchen, I inspected the reception room I hadn't been in for a while… but the fact it hadn't changed in the slightest honestly gave it an inorganic impression.

If you say there's no way it could ever change, you'd be right.

That room interior that emphasized the color white only contained the bare minimum furnishings. It looked extremely easy to clean. While the digital manga artist Satoi-sensei's workplace was also kept considerably tidy, this reception room was prone to be labeled tastelessly dreary. Well, there were plenty of rooms in the building, so perhaps a few of them were used as storehouses, and she simply didn't want to place anything unnecessary in the reception room she let clients into, but…

"Here. I hope it's to your tastes."

Kyouko-san left the coffee cup on the table… and sat across from me. Looking at her bright smile now, after seeing her so happy the other day… by comparison, I could now tell this was a complete business smile.

Rather than more intimate, it was a smile that made me feel a wall between us.

If I was going to have to feel it like this, I would rather not have known her private smile at all, I ended up thinking, but this alone wasn't something I could do away with… unlike Kyouko-san, I was unable to forget.

What's more, it became like that in the end, and to start with, I know I shouldn't refer to the day of Sunaga-sensei's death like this, but at the very least on that day, there is no doubt in my mind the train to the villa with Kyouko-san was an enjoyable journey… I don't think I want to forget that.

… Obvious as it may be, Kyouko-san's clothing wasn't the same merry, dynamic garb as the other day, she was in a calm work mode… a green flared skirt, and a pure-white blouse, there was a scarf wrapped around her neck. Since I saw her easy-going fashion the other day, it looked even more modest than usual.

"……"

The coffee she put out wasn't accompanied by sugar or milk… in the Okitegami Detective Agency, coffee must always be loaded with bitterness and acidity, the sort of black coffee that keeps you right up. Once I took a sip, Kyouko-san reached a hand towards her personal cup.

"Well then, Kakushidate-san. About the job…"

"Ah, no, Kyouko-san. Before that, I'd like you to have this."

I held out the envelope I'd been embracing.

"It's a reward for… a previous job. While I do think you've forgotten, it was a somewhat irregular job, and the agreement was to pay you in goods, umm… it also ties in with this time's job.,,"

Unable to explain well, and nervous to boot, I wound up in great dismay… well, there was no way I could say, 'I went on a date with you the other day', and if I covered that part up, the rest couldn't help but become vague.

"I see."

Kyouko-san gave an indifferent response. She held much too little interest in the jobs her past self took on… Though you could also say that was right for a detective.

“It’s Sunaga Hirubee’s unpublished manuscript. At the same time, his posthumous work.”

That was something I had to say without beating around the bush. Unless I started out with that, the talk wouldn’t get anywhere. And hearing that, “Buhah,” Kyouko-san spat the coffee in her mouth.

… That was a greater reaction that I expected. My timing was terrible there. That wasn’t the sort of thing to bring up just as she elegantly touched the coffee cup to her lips.

“M… my apologies. Please wait here a moment.”

Kyouko-san covered her mouth as she stood from her seat, disappearing behind a door in the back of the office… five minutes later, she returned, having changed out of her coffee-stained clothing. I learned something new. It does seem that door in the back is her private room. A lightly-knit turtleneck that closely fit her top half, a denim long skirt below… come to think of it, I’ve never seen Kyouko-san wear the same clothes twice. Does this person have an infinite stream of clothing?

“I’ve kept you waiting. Sunaga-sensei’s posthumous manuscript, is it?”

Kyouko-san abruptly entered the main issue. When I thought that might be her hiding her embarrassment, it did look cute.

“I learned of Sunaga Hirubee-sensei’s passing when I watched the morning news, but… what series of events has led to me receiving that manuscript?”

Her interests had suddenly risen.

That being the case, Sunaga-sensei's death was already famous news… one of the hottest topics society was making a ruckus over, so it seems she already had a grasp of it. Not having to explain that part was, honestly, a huge help. No matter the situation, being hit with the death of a beloved author head on would have to be a shock… hearing it from a distance through the news would make it easier to accept.

At the very least, easier than learning it at the person in question's villa.

"You said this is a reward for a job I accepted before, but might I ask what that job entailed?"

"Yes, feel free. Otherwise, we won't be getting anywhere… but before that, please take the envelope, or I won't be able to put a close on the previous job."

The fact I emphasized it was a job probably wasn't directed at Kyouko-san. Perhaps I was telling myself. Whatever the case, I had no intent to tell her that was a game, let alone a date.

"Yes… to think I would receive Sunaga-sensei's posthumous manuscript, you did god's work, past me."

Her business smile crumbled, her face lighting up as she accepted the envelope… holding the manuscript tightly to her chest. If possible, I'd love to be that manuscript. But regardless…

"U-um, it's not in his own handwriting, mind you. Also, you only get the right to be the first to read it, and I think it will be properly published afterward…"

I couldn't refrain from giving that remark. Whatever the case, I didn't want Kyouko-san to get too elated before the fall.

"Oh, is that so?"

Perhaps let-down, Kyouko-san showed some somewhat despondent colors, but that didn't mean she was going to let go of the manuscript she embraced.

"Of course, whether it can be safely be published or not depends on your work in the next job…"

"Understood. Please leave it to me."

Kyouko-san said such a thing without hearing out the details… it seemed the relation to Sunaga-sensei's publication had raised her motivation. Though as she was still 'on the job, she didn't get as hyper as the other day.

"I'll cooperate to the best of my ability—and forget about it by tomorrow."

Kyouko-san said… her words held no ulterior meaning.

Kyouko-san would forget… all about me, without a trace left behind.

4

In order to resolve a case, precise information was life or death… but when it came to making the job request to Kyouko-san, it was unavoidable that I had to change a few of the details when I told her about the manuscript search. I couldn't tell her exactly what happened to make her feel awkward– and even I wouldn't purposely gouge out my own wounds.

Clients tell lies.

I'm reluctant to admit it was just as Kyouko-san said.

I conveyed the truth hidden in the cassette tape as-is, explaining that she accepted Sunaga-sensei's death, undertaking the posthumous manuscript search and finding it as a 'job' through and through. Meaning, from beginning to end, it was a 'job', and she was there for work and nothing more. Once I had finished,

"Hmm?"

Kyouko-san tilted her head.

"Something feels off about that story, but… well, it's already over… let's leave it at that."

She's sharp. It seems she had somehow or another sensed that I was lying… well, I'm the sort of guy whose actions are always suspect, so even if I told her the truth, perhaps she would have doubted it anyway.

"Anyways, as a reward for discovering Sunaga-sensei's posthumous manuscript, I'm receiving a printout of it… that part is fine. But if the next job is linked to it, then that means the case wasn't closed with a happily ever after, right? Did something happened?"

Perhaps because Sunaga-sensei was involved, Kyouko-san willfully leaned her body forward as she asked… looking at her like this, perhaps Kondou-san really did make the right choice to ask Kyouko-san because she was Sunaga-sensei's fan.

"At first, Sunaga-sensei's passing was thought to be by natural causes, but it seems a suspicious point has come out in his death. The possibility of criminality, should I say…"

"Possibility of criminality? Hmm…"

The color of Kyouko-san's eye changed. She reacted to the word criminality, was this the nature of a great detective- or it could just be her professional sense.

"Then let's hear it. You're telling me that…"

"No, nothing has been concluded, and we want you to investigate into that aspect as well, but… it's possible that Sunaga-sensei's death was a suicide."

"…"

Taking Kyouko-san's enthusiasm towards Sunaga-sensei into considerations, I had my misgivings whether I should take care in my phrasing, but perhaps I succeeded in saying it gently as Kyouko-san maintained the silence. I carefully continued on.

"By which I mean to say, Sunaga-sensei usually employed the use of sleeping pills, but his autopsy showed he took more than he could handle that night…"

"Autopsy?"

Kyouko-san furrowed her stately brow.

“When it was thought there was no criminality, they performed an autopsy… did they? Not just an inspection… I see. I’m surprised they gave permission for an autopsy. Meaning, before the autopsy was performed, there must have been someone who held suspicions towards Sunaga-sensei’s death… but let’s put that off for now. A while ago, I heard Sunaga-sensei’s death was due to heart failure, and you say that was evidently due to an overdose of sleeping pills?”

“I can’t say for sure, but it may have been a contributing factor. We’re still at that vague point. Even if he was healthy, once humans stack up enough years, it’s only natural they start taking medication, after all… and even if he took too many sleeping pills, it hasn’t been concluded that it was a great enough amount to directly lead to his death. He was on in years, so perhaps we should just look at this as a heart failure with no criminality to it… that being the case, it’s undeniable that he did take too much medication.”

“And if you want me to include that in my investigation, you mean… you want me to determine whether or not Sunaga-sensei committed suicide? That’s… to be blunt, I think it will be difficult. If we were standing there on the day in question, it might be another story, but some days have passed since Sunaga-sensei’s death, and I doubt a detective can do anything more than the police and the hospital.”

It was a realistic response… how Kyouko-sanesque.

“Yes, I think so too. But in the case that Sunaga-sensei really did commit suicide, it will make for an even bigger ruckus… though there’s nothing we can do if it’s true.”

“So you want… me to find proof it wasn’t a suicide?”

Kyouko-san took the lead and spoke.

“Evidence supporting it wasn’t a suicide… I think that will be difficult as well. No, I’m sure it will be even more difficult than proving it was a suicide.”

“Please think that we’re making the request full aware of those details… what’s more, what Sakusousha wants to request of you is an approach from a different angle from the police and hospital. It’s that manuscript.”

I pointed at Sunaga Hirubee’s manuscript still in Kyouko-san’s embrace.

“As you are aware, Sunaga-sensei died very shortly after finishing his manuscript… so in the case his death was not a natural death but suicide, then there might be some indication in his last work.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it? Hmm… so as I gained the right to read it first, you want me to read and solve it… this doesn’t look like it will be a very fun read.”

Kyouko-san spoke as if to confirm it

“Naturally, he didn’t leave a will, did he.”

She asked. I nodded.

“Yes… neither a will nor testament, so his bereaved family is feuding a bit over the distribution of his estate…”

Oh, was that unnecessary information? But it did seem there was no such thing as unnecessary information to a detective and,

“So that might be precisely why the family is digging deeper into Sunaga-sensei’s death.”

Kyouko-san said.

“Perhaps- forget suicide- there may be suspicions of murder… a possibility that a certain someone intentionally overdosed Sunaga-sensei with sleeping pills.”

“R-really?”

“Who knows.”

As if to evade my advance as I leaned my body forward, Kyouko-san shrugged her shoulders, “But if that’s the case, it’s lacking.” She said.

“Lacking? Oh… are you talking about money? Yes, deciphering signs of suicide from a manuscript is definitely a peculiar request, and it’s quite plausible for you to say that. I think Sakusousha will hear you out in that regard, so you needn’t be reserved, feel free to demand more than your usual fee–”

I spoke the lines of a competent proxy, but,

“That’s not what I meant.”

Kyouko-san shook her head.

“I’ve forgotten what sort of association we’ve had to this point, but Kakushidate-san, just how greedy of a detective do you think I am… you’re wrong. I’m not asking for that much. If this posthumous manuscript is a form of will for Sunaga-sensei, then even if I read it, I won’t be able to decipher a reason for his death. That’s what I’m trying to say. I’m sure I’ll have to read the other works leading up to his writing of this novel.”

“B-by the other novels, do you mean…”

His posthumous manuscript was his will. Phrasing it like that did seem fitting of a novelist who had carved out a single generation, but just referring to his other novels in one breath… I recalled the numerous writings that filled an entire bookshelf of his study.

“Kakushidate-san, will you be able to put in an order for every work by Sunaga-sensei?”

“I think it’s possible.”

Faltering from Kyouko-san’s zeal, I nodded… it was a reflexive promise without due consideration, but if I put in a word to Kondou-san, It should be possible to find even the difficult-to-obtain books and the books out of print. In the worst case scenario, I’ll just have to go around the libraries and used book shops. But when I thought of the sheer massive number of books…

“B-but… Kyouko-san. Even if you exclude the books you’ve read and remember, that will make for a considerable amount. I don’t see it as an amount you can finish up in a day.”

“I won’t exclude the books I’ve read or the ones I remember. The books I couldn’t read because they ran out of print, and the series I avoided because they weren’t to my tastes go without saying. The books I’ve forgotten and the books I remember, I should reread them all without cutting corners. Even if I can’t read them in a day, if I’m going to do it, I should be thorough with it.”

As she said that, as if to psyche herself up, she hit both her cheeks.

“And to be thorough… an all-nighter it is.”

5

Immediately after leaving the Okitegami Detective Agency, I put in a call to assemble all of Sunaga Hirubee's work.

"Got it. I'll arrange so they're all gathered by tomorrow."

Kondou-san replied in two sentences.

"Yeah, I'm sure it'll be hard, but I'm counting on you. At this point, there will be some books that are hard to obtain."

"You saw most of them already gathered at his villa, right?"

"Oh, I see. There was that. It'll be a hassle to transport… but in that case, we'll be able to get them at a moment's notice."

Of course, Kyouko-san might have some dissatisfaction with the obligation to return them that arrangement birthed. I doubt the thought never crossed her mind to use this opportunity to collect all the Sunaga works she didn't have (Kyouko-san did listen to my story, so the notion of carrying them from the villa surely struck her).

"My apologies, Kondou-san. Troubling you like this."

"No, no, I'm the one who made an unreasonable request from the start. Yakusuke, so what you're telling me is that Okitegami-san accepted the request, right?"

"That's right. It's a bit of a surprise… she generally doesn't take up requests that span multiple days. It really goes to show Kyouko-san's Sunaga-sensei's fan."

“Well, Okitegami-san set out to become a detective after reading Sunaga-sensei’s works after all.”

“Eh? Is that true?”

“Ah… no, I just thought that might be the case. She’s simply that die-hard of a fan, I’m sure that’s how it is.”

“? … Hmm.”

He was acting a bit strange, but before I could pursue anything, “So what’s that Okitegami-san doing right now anyway?” Kondou-san pressed the conversation forward.

“If I push it, I think I’ll be able to assemble all of Sunaga-sensei’s works by the end of the day, but…”

“But even if you manage, it’ll be night, right? In that case, she’ll quickly tire out… if she falls asleep even once, Kyouko-san will forget the contents of all the books she’s read. So in order to lengthen her active hours to the limit, she’s going to have a sound sleep tonight, and start working from tomorrow morning.”

Meaning at present, for the sake of tomorrow’s work, Kyouko-san had entered a state of rest and relaxation. The plan was to have her charge up plenty by tomorrow morning and have her start work from there.

“I see. But Yakusuke, if she’s going to read every writing by Sunaga-sensei, I do think that’ll be a considerably harsh amount… it was completely beyond my expectations for Okitegami-san to take on such an approach, but will it really be possible?”

“Yeah. I said so too. But she said she had her own idea about that.”

“An idea? And what’s that?”

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me. In order to uphold duty of confidentiality, it’s a secret until the day in question, she said.”

“Hmm… well, that’s the Okitegami Detective Agency’s selling point, so even if you’re a client, it’s only natural she wouldn’t speak on the details until her work day. But, and this is just the thought of an amateur, but if you don’t hear out her idea, won’t Kyouko-san be the one forgetting it?”

“No, it seems the plan itself’s been written on her arm, so I think it’ll be fine… She probably wrote that idea somewhere on her body so she could hit the sack, right?”

“I see. Even if she’s the forgetful detective, she’s got her loopholes.”

“By the way, this is something Kyouko-san told me to ask, but Kondou-san. What do you think?”

“Mn? About what?”

“Do you think Sunaga-sensei’s death was a suicide or not. No, I mean to say, in the hypothetical case Sunaga-sensei did commit Suicide, Kyouko-san was worried whether it was really alright if she identified it. To be blunt, she might come out with a conclusion that doesn’t meet your expectations. It might bring disgrace to Sunaga-sensei’s name- she said.”

“… If you’ll let me say what’s nothing more than my personal opinion, even if that’s true, it’s something unavoidable. The current vague situation is the worst we could ask for.”

“…”

“Also, to an author, suicide isn’t as disgraceful of an ending as you might think. Of course, it depends on the motive and situation… and that’s precisely why, if that motive can be deciphered from his final manuscript, then no matter what comes of it, I want to request it to Okitegami-san.”

“Got it. Then I’ll tell Kyouko-san that tomorrow.”

With those words, I ended the call… but I wasn’t as comprehensive as I made myself sound. Suicide wasn’t a disgrace to an author, Kondou-san’s opinion simply seemed too extreme to me. Sure if you undid the strands of history, there were numerous authors who offed themselves, but I couldn’t help but wonder what era he was referring to. Perhaps Kondou-san could say that because he was an editor, but from a reader’s point of view, they were all tragedies to lament- never something to be aspired for or praised by any means.

Whatever truth lay behind Sunaga-sensei’s death, there was no way it would be alright for him to have a sense of values that affirmed suicide… but without any material to deny the possibility, that’s precisely why Kyouko-san would need to spot it from within all Sunaga-sensei’s works, and his posthumous manuscript.

6

Eighty-two full-length novels, seventeen short story collections, all giving a total of ninety-nine books… those were the complete works of the novelist Sunaga Hirubee. Strictly speaking, there were other transcribed lectures and essay collections, a few fan books as well, but those were to be excluded this time around… the movie and manga adaptations as well as other mixed media contents, even if he was involved in the screenplay, were similarly excluded. This was, to the end, restricted to the 'novels' penned by Sunaga-sensei… and regardless, it lay at this number.

We had collected only the versions closest to their original manuscripts, and they wouldn't fit neatly into a single cardboard box… even if the ration of hardcovers was high, it was overwhelming. Even if you thought of his career that ran close to fifty years, this was a considerable number. In the recent years that have shifted away from serious reading, those who wouldn't even read ninety-nine books over their entire lifetime aren't few in number, and yet, to read them all without a wink of sleep, I couldn't think Kyouko-san was in a sane state of mind.

Worthy of note was the point all his works were original text- they never passed through a magazine. The aesthetic that his novels should always stand on their own was something he persisted in from his debut. Well, I'm sure novelists who take on that stance aren't rare in and of themselves, but over forty-five years, ninety-nine books, it was fearsome that stance never crumbled.

"Plus one."

Said Kyouko-san as she stacked the envelope I handed her yesterday over the load of books hauled into her reception room.

That's right, Sunaga-sensei's posthumous work. The final volume… ninety-nine books plus one. Meaning… one hundred works.

While it might have been a coincidence, that was quite a tidy number.

“Who knows… it might not be a coincidence, Kakushidate-san. It might be that by writing his hundredth work, he determined he had finished his greatest dream as a writer, cutting off what remained of his life with his own–”

“Really? Is that a possibility?”

“I doubt it.”

She all-to-easily revoked her hypothesis.

“If all one hundred books were full-length novels, perhaps. But even if all the short stories were written to be published in book format, he’s got seventeen collections of them… if that was his criteria for suicide, I’m sure that once one hundred volumes were fully published and printed without exaggeration… that would be the time he’d choose.”

“I see… then how about this? If he committed suicide right after writing that manuscript, his last work, then is it possible he wrote the true masterpiece he had been pursuing for many years, thus finally achieving his greatest dream?”

I don’t mean to say whether I know Sunaga-sensei was pursuing some ‘true masterpiece’ over ‘many years’, but if that was the case, I thought we could finish up with Kyouko-san only reading one work, making me bring forth an exceedingly selfish theory, but, “No, I highly doubt that one,” Kyouko-san denied it as well… what’s more, it was a somewhat scornful denial.

“Sunaga-sensei wasn’t that sort of artistic author. Rather than prolific, he was the sort to overproduce literature. I really, really don’t see him seeking out the supreme.”

Based on how one took it, her evaluation might sound like vilification, but Kyouko-san’s tone sounded like criticism coming precisely from the fact she was a fan.

“What’s more, I forgot to say it, but after I woke up in the morning, while I was waiting for your arrival, I wanted to use my time as efficiently as possible, so I went and read this final piece. To be honest, I can’t think it was an ultimate completion great enough to exchange his life for.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“I enjoyed it, of course, but it feels off for me to use words like ultimate or masterpiece to describe it… as far as I can remember, I enjoyed it, I’m looking forward to what he writes next. It was the same feeling I always got from reading Sunaga Hirubee.”

I see- that destroys a few of my premises. Whether it’s ultimate or not aside, while I had gotten the feeling the writing of that novel was related to Sunaga-sensei’s death, before I realized it, I was already wondering… could it be irrelevant?

“Yes. From what I can see from its contents, I don’t think there was any reason that would cause Sunaga-sensei to commit suicide…. But still, this is- to the end- an impression based on my criterion. I’m sure yesterday’s me would have said it as well, but I won’t be able to give any decent conclusion just by reading this book. After I read these gathered ninety-nine volumes and reread this posthumous manuscript, it might change the way I see it.”

Kyouko-san looked down over all of Sunaga-sensei’s work.

“Let’s start off with roughly lining them in order… as accurately as possible, I want to read them in the order they were published. That alone will take considerable time, but looking at the inside covers should…”

“Ah, that one’s alright. Kondou-san already took care of it. He said I might need it and handed me this list.”

I took the paper I’d been entrusted from my pocket… he was able to produce something like this in a night, so that person’s no ordinary man himself.

List of Works by Sunaga-sensei

Produced by Sakusousha Kondou Fumifusa

1	Murder at the River's Depths	1	2 / 9
2	Eyedrop Exposition		10 / 17
3	The Path the Angel Treads	2	1 / 4
4	Silent Debate		4 / 4
5	Thorny Memories		7 / 6
6	A Man's Simple Home	3	8 / 10
7	Information Supply and Demand	4	2 / 2
8	The Culprit's Attire		3 / 9
9	Taking Advantage of the Guiltless		4 / 4
10	Reverse Detection		9 / 2
11	The Accomplice's Signal	5	2 / 1
12	Pros, Cons, Gains, and Loss		5 / 9
13	Current Whereabouts Unknown		8 / 1
14	The Devil's Successor		11 / 5
15	Conceits of Courting		12 / 4
16	Solutions and Solving	6	3 / 13
17	The Beloved Child's Dealings		6 / 22
18	The Chest is Above the Stomach		10 / 10
19	The Three Sided Mirror Murder Case	7	1 / 10
20	The Cost of Killing Intent		6 / 30
21	Sandal King		10 / 2
22	Puff Piece		12 / 13
23	Proof by Hearsay	8	1 / 20
24	Sprained Ankle		2 / 1
25	The Victim of Mine Eye		2 / 20
26	Manmade Locked Room		5 / 8
27	A Terribly Reckless...	9	3 / 15
28	A Curous Pebble		7 / 1
29	The Seventh Upset	10	1 / 7
30	The Absconding of my Brother		6 / 12
31	My House's Tatami Prison		10 / 10
32	The Golden Rule of Theft	11	4 / 2
33	An Incoherent Series of Incidents	12	4 / 14
34	A Short Story of Decryption		8 / 27
35	Our Unruled Notebook	13	2 / 14
36	The Girl's Misfortune		4 / 20
37	Unidentified Corpse	14	1 / 31
38	Idle Idility		9 / 29
39	Leaving None for My Descendent		10 / 4
40	Preventing the Assasination Plot		10 / 16
41	Suspicious Sweet Talk	15	5 / 12
42	The Crime Scene		6 / 20
43	The Culprit who Waited		10 / 1
44	Amended Law		11 / 24
45	Traces of You	16	1 / 25
46	Misfire		3 / 10
47	The Nipping Remains		3 / 15
48	The Life the Angel Treads	17	2 / 18
49	Guilt and Innocence: The Reversible Lane		4 / 17
50	Tedious Death		10 / 8

51	Confused Killer	18	2 / 3
52	If You're Trigger Happy and you Know it, Sound the Bell	19	1 / 9
53	Dry Battery Electrocution	20	2 / 16
54	Shed Husk	23	6 / 21
55	Rain Man, Rain Woman		6 / 30
56	Tragedy of the Queen Bee		6 / 30
57	Bravo, Kiryuu	24	1 / 29
58	The Ms. Of the Provence		3 / 8
59	The Noblewoman's Spy	25	1 / 11
60	Staining Candle		5 / 28
61	Inside the Lover		9 / 12
62	The Great Detective Meiko's Case Log	26	2 / 19
63	The School Camp's Monster Garden		4 / 19
64	Surprise Test in a Secret Room		6 / 19
65	The Detective's Summer Vacation		8 / 19
66	The Flutter Kick Club	27	2 / 22
67	A Birthday without the Great Detective Meiko		8 / 19
68	A Detective Sports Meet	30	2 / 19
69	Bittersweet Culture Festival		4 / 19
70	A Beaurocratic Offense	31	9 / 9
71	Fatal Beating Regulation		11 / 8
72	Hopelessly Outnumbered	32	4 / 18
73	The Proof it Moved		8 / 4
74	One, Two, Tragedee	33	7 / 1
75	Writhing God		11 / 9
76	Rearview Mirror		12 / 17
77	Unreported Crime	34	1 / 9
78	I Let Sleeping Dogs Lie		1 / 13
79	Chartreuse Boy		2 / 3
80	Taken to Heart	35	6 / 19
81	The Suspect's Fanbase		10 / 8
82	Politeness Killer	36	1 / 31
83	The Retired Officer's Real Parents		5 / 26
84	Cellphone Detective	37	3 / 22
85	Cellphone Detective 2		8 / 22
86	Steal the Color Blue	38	9 / 10
87	The Red of Betrayal		12 / 10
88	Blue Sunset	39	7 / 13
89	Brothers' Exchange Rate	40	2 / 9
90	A Villain's Share		9 / 14
91	I'm Called a Killer	41	1 / 27
92	Scale Merit		4 / 3
93	Whos and Whos		8 / 21
94	Tiring of Murder	42	7 / 5
95	TFTB	43	1 / 23
96	But Endou...		11 / 2
97	Pine Leaf	44	3 / 26
98	Out the Patio Door		9 / 17
99	The Pitching Green	45	5 / 28

“I see. This is quite something. I’m thankful for his consideration. Please give that Kondou-san my regards.”

When she had already met him twice, she made it sound awfully like someone else’s business, I thought, but to ‘Today’s Kyouko-san’, the capable man called Kondou Fumifusa was a name she first heard from me at this moment. Even so, he still earns her admiration just like that. As expected of Kondou-san.

“What’s more, it’s easy to understand. The number next to the release date must be Sunaga-sensei’s career, right? From his first year to his forty-fifth… couldn’t this be used as-is for the collection of Sunaga-sensei’s complete works that’s sure to come out soon? There’s barely anything to add… if anything… it would be this final piece.”

“Should I add it on? What’s the title?”

“It hasn’t been given one yet. Sunaga-sensei was the type to decide on the title at the very end. In some cases, it was left blank until the moment before publication… perhaps he intended it to be that way this time around as well.”

In that case, the thought he went to the other world in satisfaction after completing his final work is growing less and less likely… in that case, at the very least, he’d decide on a title before he died.

“He had a strong fixation on names… is that what it meant?”

“There’s also a theory he simply sucked at naming things. If I were to have to name this posthumous manuscript, I would call it, ‘The Cob of the Corn’, perhaps?”

“I see… ‘The Cob of the Corn’, is it?”

I hadn’t read it, so I was unable to evaluate whether or not that was a fitting name… but just as I was told, I added it onto the list. Though I couldn’t help but leave the publication date blank.

“Then I’ll be taking my leave. I left my contact information, so once you’ve finished reading everything, if there’s anything you figure out, feel free to contact me at any time.”

Thinking it was about time to go home, I stood from my seat, but there, Kyouko-san spoke up,

“Eh? T-that would be troublesome.”

She hurriedly called me to a stop.

“Didn’t you hear anything from me yesterday?”

“About… what?”

“Ah, I see. Oh me, I must have stayed silent to uphold a duty of confidentiality. My apologies. Anyways, Kakushidate-san, please take a seat for now. Would you like another cup of coffee?”

“Then I don’t mind if I do…”

What is this? Well, I had no reason to decline the coffee Kyouko-san brewed (I’d enjoy it more if it wasn’t served straight) and I didn’t have any reason to hurry home (I was unemployed), but if I stayed too long, I worried that with each passing moment, I’d be robbing Kyouko-san of her valuable work time. Thinking of how she was going to be pulling consecutive all-nighters after this, Kyouko-san surely had to set about reading as soon as possible, but…

“The truth is, there’s something I’d like your cooperation with.”

After preparing two peoples' worth of coffee, Kyouko-san turned to me.

"Oh… yes, well, if it's something I'm capable of."

From how I accepted without listening to the contents just because it was Kyouko-san's request, I really can't say anything against Kyouko-san, who took up the job the moment she heard Sunaga-sensei's name.

"From here on, until I finish reading these hundred books, I can't have a single wink of sleep, but as you can see, I am but a single human being, and I might not be able to win against my somnolence. Even if just once, one moment I fall asleep, I will forget all my reading to that point… such is the sorrow of the forgetful detective."

"Yes… that's right."

But I'm sure she was well aware of that beforehand. Kyouko-san surely knew that when she accepted this job I definitely couldn't call suited for the Okitegami Detective agency… but come to think of it, she did say she had an idea, didn't she?

"Yes. A perfectly conceived idea to the letter."

Kyouko-san stroked her stomach.

"And even the to the letter part is to the letter… when I woke up today morning, it was written around here. 'If you get sleepy, have Kakushidate Yakusuke-san (Giant) wake you'."

"Eh? You want me to wake you…"

"It's a straight-forward sentence, and its meaning is clear. It means I simply have to have Kakushidate-san keep a constant watch over me so I don't fall asleep, or so it seems yesterday's me thought- will you take it up?"

It was a light shock to find out Kyouko-san thought of me as a giant, but more than that, I was happy to have her rely on me like that. But keeping watch to make sure a person pulling all-nighters didn't fall asleep meant that I would have to likewise, stay by her, rather than just watch, and pull all-nighters myself. But at that moment, my head hadn't got around to thinking that far through.

"Of course, if you'll assist me, I'll pay you for your time, and even if I say that, I don't think it'll take too many days. I might have already told you, but I've already read about half of them at least once."

"Hah..."

What's this, so I even get a salary for it. It's not like I'll be reading the books, and a job where I just had to watch over a working Kyouko-san from the side was more than a currently-unemployed job-hunting man could ask for.

"If you say you can't, of course, I won't force you. In that case, I can put in a request to that Kondou-san who you spoke of a while ago and..."

"Understood. You have my cooperation. No, please let me cooperate. If Sunaga-sensei did indeed commit suicide, I want to know the reason."

Around eighty percent of that statement was a lie, but that didn't mean I could speak out my real intent that gazing at a working Kyouko-san and getting money for it was the best job in the world, and that I didn't want to concede that unanticipated job to Kondou-san... What's more, if a smooth-sailing bigshot author suddenly chose death without any portent, my desire to know the reason did take up at least twenty percent of me. That much was true. When I'm someone who's got doubts thrown at me, false accusations thrown at me, who gets fired left and right, and who's three steps away from being thrown out onto the street, and even I didn't want to die...

If after reading all of Sunaga-sensei's works, Kyouko-san doesn't figure anything out after all, if she reaches the conclusion his death was by

natural causes, that may be for the best… Whatever the case, now that I was involved, I wanted to see it through.

“Is that so. So you’ll take up the offer That’s a huge help, how joyous. Then my apologies, you’ll require a contract of employment, so I’m sure you won’t mind if we write up a written oath.”

“Ah, yes. That’s right, I’ll need to take up a duty of confidentiality as well, after all. But I never even imagined it would come down to this, so I didn’t bring my seal with me.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything so official, just your signature is enough. We just have to make it clear that I employed you by my own will.”

After handing over the thick magic marker she had fetched from her desk when she went to get coffee, Kyouko-san rolled up the sleeve of her right arm.

“So won’t you write down your vows over here?”

7

I, Kakushidate Yakusuke, solemnly swear that, as a temporary hire of the Okitegami Detective Agency, I will continue rousing my boss, Okitegami Kyouko.

8

A job of constantly watching Kyouko-san work was wonderful, or so I leapt on without any deep thought or analysis, but come to think of it, as a person who continued being dragged into cases as a mere side character, it was the grand promotion I could never imagine.

Miraculously, through the contract written on Kyouko-san's wring arm, it came to be realized… that I was her right-hand man. Right, the first job I got since I was fired from the Sarashina Research Institute was 'Great Detective's Assistant' of all things.

A so-called Watson role.

Great detective is an occupation only for those beloved by the god of crime, so looking at it that way, the Watson role was the highest rank a standard person could achieve… I couldn't help but rejoice.

Of course, it was only limited to this case, and once the truth of Sunaga-sensei's death came to light, my employment contract would finish, and I'd yet again revert to Side Character A (No, perhaps B or C?), but… well, I shouldn't think too hard about the future to ruin my current mood.

To start with, I should concentrate on what's before my eyes.

It's the same with every job out there.

That being the case, I concentrated on my job of staring at Kyouko-san as she sat and read before my eyes… Kyouko-san wouldn't lend me an eye as she promptly started from Sunaga Hirubee's debut work.

Sunaga Hirubee's 'Murder at the River's Depths'.

A novel released forty-five years ago… the title and design were both products of the time, and it felt like an overly-serious, orthodox mystery novel. I was most accustomed to Sunaga-sensei's face as a young adult author with 'The Great Detective Meiko's Case Log' as his representative work, so I didn't really know his literary style on that side… rather, Sunaga-sensei published way too much, and honestly, the likes of me couldn't hope to grasp the expanse of his writing style.

"Right. The first few years from his debut, until he got on track, it seems his writings were centered around this sort of strict mystery novel. This might be a bad way to put it, but I think it would be accurate to say he rode the mainstream wave of the time through his debut."

Hearing that, I confirmed with the list Kondou-san drafted up… I see, judging from the titles, it was nothing but those sorts of works.

"He was thirty at his debut… was he? Not too early or too late for an author to get going."

"Yes. However, it seems Sunaga-sensei himself thought that thirty was too young to write an orthodox mystery, so he concealed his age at the time of his debut. I get the feeling that thought process itself is too youthful, but, well, no matter how old Sunaga Hirubee gets, he had to have made his debut somewhere, and he had to be young at some point."

"Could it be like how Satoi-sensei operates under a male name because she writes shonen Manga?"

"I do not know who this Satoi-sensei is, but I presume it is something like that."

Without stopping the hands turning the pages, Kyouko-san answered my question. I had my misgivings about talking to her in the midst of her reading, but she said she would actually be better off if I did. She had only started reading, but for the sake of when the night wore on and she grew sleepy, she wanted to grow accustomed to conversing with me… an awkward conversation at that point would only increase her drowsiness.

“I see. So it’s because he didn’t want to look young that he chose such a strange, antiquated penname.”

“Sunaga Hirubee is his real name.”

Said Kyouko-san.

“Eh? With that str… peculiar name, I was sure it was a pen name. hmm…”

Well, it’s not like my parents gave me a name that let me say too much on the matter.

“So which of Sunaga-sensei’s works was the first one you read?”

“It might sound cliché, but it was ‘Writhing God’.”

I couldn’t tell whether that response was cliché or not… but that title was one I knew. I hadn’t read it, but I recall it was adapted into a serial drama with a popular actor playing the lead role… it got a movie as well.

“Right. I saw the movie first. Let me be honest, I can’t deny I felt like I was just going with the trend when I picked up the book, but I got myself hooked. After that, as if to become an expert on the subject, I laid hands on every Sunaga-sensei work I could get my hands on.”

Fufu, Kyouko-san smiled.

Recalling a past… it was to Kyouko-san a valuable ‘past’ she was able to recall.

“W-why do you like Sunaga-sensei’s works that much? I think it’s considerably rare for a detective by occupation to have a liking for mystery novels… truth be told, that’s partly why Kondou-san decided to request this job to you.”

Far from it, Kondou-san even said Kyouko-san set out to be a detective after reading Sunaga-sensei's works… in that case, you could call him the author who decided Kyouko-san's life.

But- and I say this fully accepting Sunaga-sensei as a great mystery author- Sunaga Hirubee wasn't supposed to be that sort of novelist. For better or worse, take it how you will, but he was an author who focused on entertainment, and not the sort society saw as one to contemplate the meaning of life or influence someone's future. He was also uninvolved with any literary competition. Even if his name might become the name of an award, he never won one himself… that sort of author.

"The reason I love Sunaga-sensei's works is clear. It's because Sunaga-sensei is always facing life head-on."

"Facing life…?"

"Of course, he has his basis as a mystery author, so people die left and right. But those lives are never tossed aside or treated roughly… that writing style of his is what charmed a teenage me."

"I see…"

Even if she spoke fervently on the matter, I didn't get that impression at all, so I wasn't able to nod along. An impression of a book differs from person to person. The 'Great Detective Meiko' series I enjoyed was for a younger audience, and its cases didn't involve anyone dying, but that was precisely why they struck so close to home. Disregarding me, Kyouko-san continued on.

"That's why I think it's strange. After placing such weight on the value of life, no matter the reason, I can't think that Sunaga-sensei would choose suicide."

She said.

Hearing that, I contrarily grew anxious… Kondou-san requested for Kyouko-san because she was Sunaga-sensei's fan, but as I listened to her manner of speech, my fears that she might be unsuited for looking into Sunaga-sensei's death were resurfacing.

Because she was a fan, her investigation was grounded in the preconceived notion that it was unbelievable for Sunaga-sensei to commit suicide… though it probably didn't go that far. However, reading one hundred books like this was something only a fan could do. Perhaps I shouldn't read too deeply into it?

I've experienced it before as well, but if your love towards a work is too deep, you might read it in an outrageous way from time to time… perhaps perceiving what was on my mind, Kyouko-san spoke up.

"For example, as far as I know, in his writing career, Sunaga-sensei has taken around two different breaks from writing each spanning a few years."

She said. Hearing that, I looked at the list for reference… sure enough, from the twenty-first to twenty-third, and twenty-seventh to thirtieth year of his career, he didn't publish a single new work. Why would that be, I wonder.

"Of course, during that time, his past publications were still being printed, and his works were adapted to different media, so he didn't give off the impression he had stopped working… afterward, Sunaga-sensei did talk about it in one of his essays. The first break was his mother, and the second was his father."

"So he was in mourning… is that what it means?"

"Yes, so it seems. Or perhaps he was too shocked to move his pen."

I had to tilt my head at a working adult who had been at his career for over twenty years unable to do his job from the death of a family member… of course, it would be a shock, but wasn't dragging it out three

years a bit much? If that's why it meant to 'Face life head-on', this really went beyond the norm.

"At the very least,"

Kyouko-san continued on.

"From what I can recall from the scope of the novels I've read, there hasn't been a single person who committed suicide in any of Sunaga-sensei's works."

"What… not a single one?"

"Yes. Not one. No side characters, no characters who don't appear whose existences are only implied… it's almost as if Sunaga-sensei was avoiding the notion of suicide itself."

"…"

At those words, I thought.

Was the really true? Just as the 'Great Detective Meiko' series avoided death, I can understand why he'd want to avoid using some words and notions, but… in all his works, without exception?

"Of course, strictly speaking, there are some exceptions. The names of historic individuals who committed suicide do occasionally come up in the flow of conversation… but in that case as well, he wouldn't touch on the fact those individuals killed themselves."

"That's, how should I put it…"

Just a coincidence… wasn't enough to write it off.

Based on the author, it's possible such coincidences might occur, but despite the wide breadth of Sunaga-sensei's works, he was fundamentally a mystery author… for a mystery author to continue writing without using the word 'suicide', was it really possible? Wouldn't it be just as difficult as a sci-fi author going his entire life without using the word science? A murder made to look like a suicide, a suicide set up to look like a murder… without using any such tricks, could one really continue to write mystery novels for forty-five years…

"Ah, no, it's still too early to make any conclusions. I'm just saying it never came out in what I can remember of the novels I read. I'm reading all Sunaga-sensei's works to look into that as well."

"If it's his recent works, they've been digitized, so if we ask Kondou-san, I think he'll be able to do a word search."

"Self-destruct, hang oneself, take the leap, seppuku, slit wrists. There are countless ways one can express suicide… I have no choice but to search for the nuance with my own eyes. Additionally, I'm not reading all these books just to search for vocabulary. If I had to say, that's of secondary importance."

"I-is that so??"

From what I could hear, that would make for quite decisive proof that Sunaga-sensei's death wasn't a suicide… but if that's all she was doing, I get the feeling she would've told me yesterday.

"Yes. I mean if I set up a hypothesis of, 'That's why Sunaga-sensei didn't commit suicide' from that fact, then from that same exact information, one could say, 'Sunaga-sensei held suicide in such high esteem he wouldn't use the term so easily'- it would be possible to read it either way."

Once she said it, I got the feeling it was true… it was a paradox of mystery, or rather, anything could simultaneously become evidence to prove two opposite theories. No, what Kyouko-san was currently trying to decipher was why that couldn't be the case, but… it sends shivers down my spine

when I think of if she read one hundred books, and it all turned out to be a wasted effort… Could it be Kyouko-san had some sort of conviction?

"By the way, the Sunaga-sensei work I liked best was the 'Great Detective Meiko' series that starts with 'Great Detective Meiko's Case Log'."

"Eh!?"

Kyouko-san likely arbitrarily said it to change the flow of the conversation, but I unintentionally gave a grand reaction… of all things, it had to be the sole Sunaga-sensei series I read every volume of, that Kyouko-san loved? And she was saying that after giving quite a strict evaluation to the posthumous manuscript, so I was enveloped in a delight as if I had found a comrade of similar taste… no, it's not like my love of 'Meiko' was particularly higher than the norm, but…

"Yes. Contrarily, the ones I can't stand are his sensual books like 'Conceits of Courting' and 'The Absconding of my Brother', and his grotesque, 'The Chest is Above the Stomach'… but I'll be using this opportunity to give them a read."

As she said that, Kyouko-san clicked the first book, 'Murder at the River's Depths' shut.

"Ah, are you taking a break? Yeah, no matter how you look at it, I talked way too much. My apologies."

"No, don't mind it. Thanks to you, I actually made some good progress, and I've just finished reading the first book."

"Already!?"

I was surprised… not even an hour had passed since she started reading. While she tried being tactful, saying it was 'thanks to me', surely her pace itself had fallen as she read while conversing with me. At this rate, wouldn't she be able to read one hundred volumes surprisingly quickly?

“Ah, it would be troublesome if you place such expectations on me. This ‘Murder at the River’s Depths’ is a book I read countless times before, so I was able to maintain top speed on this reread… I doubt it will go that way for books I haven’t read, and books whose contents I’ve forgotten.”

And even if she could remember them, I’m sure there were books that left light impressions… Kyouko-san turned her eyes to the mountain of books.

“In that case, Kakushidate-san, it’s alright if you sleep on that sofa while you still can. This is going to be a long trek… it’s fine if I’m the only one losing sleep.”

That was definitely logical, but I wasn’t shameless enough to sleep right in front of Kyouko-san when she held the resolve to pull all-nighters… Kyouko-san picked up the second book.

Ninety-nine books remained… the great detective’s battle had only just begun.

9

Come to think of it, if this was simply a coincidence, and yet, Sunaga-sensei's death was a suicide, the fact he chose sleeping pills to go must be some grand irony… I didn't even have to recall the Sarashina Research Institute to know that sleeping pills were something of Kyouko-san's natural enemy.

Sunaga-sensei died in his sleep, and Kyouko would spend many a sleepless night investigating it; it was a little too well-put-together to stem from pure chance… and as I was coincidentally impudently chosen to sit through it, I couldn't deny I felt out of place, but at most as a witness, I would see it through.

That being the case, it was true the battle had entered its second half, and these were simply the rude thoughts going through the head of someone was still intently staring at Kyouko-san, who had yet to grow sleepy… Keeping Kyouko-san in my field of vision as she went at the second book, I tried conducting some light calculations. In all actuality, just how long would it take to finish reading one hundred books?

Even if she had already read around half of the books, considering how her pace would probably drop with time… if she takes around two hours to read a book on average, then two hundred hours? No, no, in that case, it will be over a week before she finishes reading… there's no way a human could stay up that long. That's not at the level where motivation and guts can make up for it. In the worst case, it's insomnia on the level that could kill someone… as far as I know, Kyouko-san's consecutive all-nighter record is three nights. She prepared for this from yesterday, and perhaps it's alright if I think she won't have too many problems today.

It's just, back then, she had become considerably unsteady on her feet last time, and I think her mind was growing hazy around the end… even if it takes three syllables to say all-nighter, most people get in a small wink of sleep when they pull one off, but Kyouko-san couldn't permit such a thing. In such a state, can a human continue to read a book? The time it took to read the first book, "Murder at the River's Depths" was approximately

thirty minutes… perhaps the match depends on how long she can keep up that pace for the books she's read before. But it's precisely in the last spurt where her drowsiness has reached her peak that she'll run into a boss rush of new releases she's never read before (or perhaps forgotten). This absolute structure was way too unsuited for Kyouko-san.

To read them in the order they were written was crucial, and the books had to be read in that order. While Kyouko-san said that, taking efficiency into account, wouldn't it be better to read them starting with the posthumous manuscript (tentatively The Cob of the Corn) and working backward from there… or perhaps whittle it down to only the unread (unremembered) books and rely on memory for the rest? No, I didn't even have to put such thoughts to words. Kyouko-san herself should know that better than anyone else… on top of that knowledge, she knows that she should read every work in order, so I shouldn't stick my mouth in her decision.

I can only watch over her.

… It was an assumption that didn't hold much meaning, but if I were to try comprehending one hundred books, I would surely read them by series. With that in mind, I tried reorganizing the list. In his life as an author, Sunaga-sensei undertook numerous series, but… specifically how many series did he write? I thought I'd try asking Kyouko-san, there were surely series that started running after Kyouko-san lost a grasp of them, so I decided to count on my own. It wasn't just to kill time, in order to make best use of my free time, doing that sort of task might end up helping out Kyouko-san's work. Just watching her work from the side couldn't be called Watson's job… there were some things that couldn't be discerned from the titles alone, so I checked the blurbs of each novel for reference every time.

The result was as follows.

1. ‘Drug Detective’: 2・3・4・6・8
2. ‘Nameless Reasoning’: 5・7・9・10
3. ‘The Aging Assistant Inspector’: 11・12・13・14・16・19
4. ‘Courting’: 15・17・24・30・31
5. ‘Professor Dissector’: 18・23・27・28・29
6. ‘Demon Brigade’: 34・27・40
7. ‘Sealed Room Specialist’: 35・36・43
8. ‘Phantasmal Travel Log’: 34・37・40
9. ‘Class 6-6’: 35・36・43
10. ‘Koiwai’s Detective Story’: 38・39・42・44・46・54・55・58
11. ‘The Idiom Detective’: 41・45・47
12. ‘Judge Sorine’: 49・52・53
13. ‘Euthanastic Detective S’: 50・59
14. ‘Shitsune Kurenai’: 56・60・61
15. ‘Kiryuu’s Priesthood’: 57・70・71・77
16. ‘Great Detective Meiko’: 62・63・64・65・67・68・69
17. ‘Star Doctor’: 72・74・81
18. ‘The Clock Store’: 73・82・96
19. ‘Retired Officer’: 75・76・78・80・83・94
20. ‘Cellphone Detective’: 84・85・92・93・97
21. ‘The Thief of Blue’: 86・87・88・99
22. ‘Approximate Brothers’: 89・90・91・95・98

… Separating them into groups made it clear that a majority of the ninety-nine volumes were part of a series.

Carrying twenty-two series over his life, that’s quite something… what’s more, each one of those series was already completed, making it truly fearsome.

This might be one of the reasons Sunaga-sensei is accepted as both a mainstream and first-rate author.

Without abandoning any series half-way, he would spend as many years as it took to complete them… as long as he had a single reader, it was a writer’s duty to finish their writing, that was Sunaga-sensei’s pride as an

author, apparently. Contrarily, no matter how popular a series was, he wouldn't prolong it, ending them in an average of five novels; something that also might be a source of pride. Even the series were written in a way that they could be picked up at any volume, they were popular with men and women of all ages, and the way he continued running a straight line all his life was a tale I had to nod at.

… But while Sunaga-sensei's impression as a mystery author was strongest, looking at it like this, there were numerous works that weren't so. The sensual series Kyouko-san wasn't good with, and the grotesque, some works geared towards lighthearted nonsense… it seems he had fantasy works, and belles-lettres as well.

Meaning he was more varied than prolific.

But even so, the man who produced that world-famous detective Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle didn't actually call himself a mystery author, he proclaimed himself to be a sci-fi fantasy writer with his 'Lost World' as his representative piece… looking at his work comprehensibly then even if just by transitive property, there's no doubt Sunaga-sensei is a recognized mystery author.

"…Mn? Kyouko-san, I think I might have just noticed something incredible."

"Yes? What is it?"

The way Kyouko-san lifted her face from her book, rather than being curious as to what I had noticed, it seems she was more suspicious of my overly motivated theatrical tone, and her eyes were just a little doubtful. I cleared my throat to calm myself, "I tried separating Sunaga-sensei's works by series to analyze them, but…" I continued on.

"It seems Sunaga-sensei hasn't started any new series these past few years. Forget starting anything, he's been finishing up his long-running series one after the next. This is almost as if he's trying to put an end to his life as an–"

“Ah. That. I heard someone say that on the morning news. But that’s something only an amateur Sunaga-sensei fan would say.”

Without hearing my discovery to the end, Kyouko-san returned her gaze to the page. An amateur fan… what sort of expression is that?

“That phenomenon is nothing rare. In the past, there have been a number of similar periods where numerous series ended, and each time, his fans would grow concerned.”

Hearing that, I took another look at the list. Sure enough, Sunaga-sensei simply wrote so many books that it wasn’t conspicuous, but the times when all his running series ended at once happened twice before… this wasn’t the first.

And after those were over, he started up new series as if it was natural.

What happens twice will happen thrice.

It seems my grand discovery was common sense among his fans.

“Does that mean his posthumous manuscript was the first volume of a new series?”

“No, ‘The Cob of the Corn’ was a standalone.”

“Standalone…? Oh, you mean it was completed in and of itself without being included in any series?”

While they were few in number, in Sunaga-sensei’s long career, he had written those sorts of books as well… for example, his debut work ‘Murder at the River’s Depths’ was like that, and after that, the ‘The Victim of Mine Eye’ was a standalone as well. A few others scattered around… apart from his famous debut piece, they were all titles I had never heard of until I looked at the list.

“Right. Among his fans, all his standalones besides ‘Murder at the River’s Depths’ are seen as light palate cleansers. Not palate cleansers for the reader, but cleansers for the author… Perhaps sometimes Sunaga-sensei gets in the mood to write a novel without regards to readership or sales, they say.”

“A palate cleanser… is it…”

“Perhaps I should call it a rest for his pen.”

“…”

If that’s how it is, it kinda sounds heroic… to spell it out, even during his rests, he was writing novels… once it’s gone that far, I can only think he was possessed by something. Even if there was no suicide, couldn’t that absurd writing style have been shortening his lifespan? In my school days, the class prodigy studied on their break between studying and studying, but from Sunaga-sensei’s career, I felt something similar, something that even exceeded that.

And I held that same sort of awe for Kyouko-san in my sight… I couldn’t help but sense it from the great detective who would try reading one hundred books without a wink of sleep.

“… Kyouko-san, why did you want to become a detective?”

I tried asking… no, Kondou-san said Kyouko-san set out to become a detective after reading Sunaga-sensei’s work, but it wasn’t as if I wanted to confirm the truth of the matter. It really is just a whim, I asked with the flow.

I couldn’t no longer bear the nervousness of this tête-à-tête with Kyouko-san, and even as a hired assistant, it was a somewhat intrusive question. To cover for myself, “See, I’m in the middle of job hunting right now…” I added on.

“So I’m extremely thankful that you’re offering me work, but… I was just thinking of what I should do to live after this. No matter what work I do, it just doesn’t feel right for me. What work am I going to do for my life? I’ve always puzzled over it.”

“I see.”

Kyouko-san gave a half-hearted response. I mean, if a large-framed assistant she thinks of as a giant suddenly brought forth these life consultations, I doubt she would know how to answer. Especially to ‘today’s Kyouko-san’, I was just a side character she dragged in, and she didn’t even know I was facing a scarcity of employment.

As truth would have it, “I don’t know your situation…” Kyouko-san gave as a preface before,

“But the reason I became a detective?”

She said.

Even if hypothetically, the reason she set out to be a detective was intertwined with Sunaga-sensei’s works, there was no way she would tell someone (she thinks) she just met today something so fundamental to the basis of the forgetful detective. I was sure it was because detective was the occupation she could best use her special trait of resetting every day… I had expected such an obvious answer in return, but those expectations were turned on their head.

“There is none.”

10

I didn't even have to take Sunaga Hirubee's forty-five years as a reference to say there was no easy job in the world… even so, man must work if he wants to eat. Nay, at some point long ago, Sunaga-sensei surely saved enough so he could eat without working any more, but even so, he continued to work… then no matter what pains I go through, no matter how things don't go my way, perhaps there is meaning in work itself.

But having experienced various workplaces, having been fired from various workplaces, that wasn't something I could agree with so easily… and to make sure a working Kyouko-san didn't fall asleep, I had been given a dream-like job of keeping constant watch of her reading form, but even that had its dark side after all. No, that 'after all' was a sort of labor and toil the likes of which I had never experienced before.

It didn't take very long for me to recognize that watching Kyouko-san and making sure she didn't fall asleep meant that I couldn't sleep as well (I realized that by the first night), but this watch duty held a problem that made such things seem inconsequential.

That problem started become plainly blatant from the second night onwards, when Kyouko-san's reading efficiency was beginning to fall… as it was a trade secret, I couldn't determine how much of Sunaga-sensei's work Kyouko-remembered, or forgot, what she had read and what she hadn't, but as the number of books she read exceeded fifty, the speed at which she turned the pages evidently declined.

The thing is, I couldn't determine whether or not that was simply because she entered the realm of books she didn't remember… rather, that couldn't be the case. The fiftieth and fifty-first books were published before Kyouko-san was born… if she said she didn't remember them, then I doubt she would even remember Sunaga Hirubee's name either. But her pace was collapsing down… the reason was clear, and at that point, Kyouko-san was beginning to show a considerably thick shade of fatigue.

“It’s more tiring… than I imagined, this reading thing. Ahaha…”

At that time, Kyouko-san still had the leisure to laugh, but I secretly got a bad premonition… it didn’t take long for that premonition to hit the mark. Thinking back, when I wondered what I would do if I grew sleepy before Kyouko-san, that was truly a self-centered thought. There was no way that a man who wasn’t doing anything, simply staring at Kyouko-san would ever reach their limit before someone who constantly concentrated on reading the books.

There’s no use in a fool like me obfuscating the problem forever, so to put it bluntly, approximately seventy-two hours from the start of this reading marathon… Kyouko-san’s smile disappeared.

To say the unvarnished truth, she was in a terrible mood.

Around the point right after her first all-nighter, both our tensions contrarily rose, and conversations sprung around on matters besides Sunaga-sensei as well (Come to think of it, that time was the peak of this job’s enjoyment), but those conversations she said were to keep her awake, from the third day onwards, had practically disappeared… “Do your best,” even if I sent some words of encouragement, “I’m doing my best. Does it look like I’m not?” I would get some thorny words in return.

“Then I’ll do the very best that I possibly can. Because a certain someone insists.”

… Of course, that naturally led to silence. But even if I didn’t talk, for example, I simply stood to use the restroom, “Please walk quieter, I can’t concentrate. Don’t get in my way.” I ended up inviting in her curse.

Right, without understanding the essence of the job left to me, I had frivolously rejoiced over it… the job I only understood up to, ‘I want you to accompany me on my all-nighters’, ended up being, ‘endlessly rouse a person at their physical limit’. It wasn’t limited to Kyouko-san, there was no one out there whose mood would improve with drowsiness, and all the same, there was no one out there whose spirits would rise if they were shaken while sleepy.

Which means, my role wasn't that of a watchman.

I was the torturer, so to speak.

This was by no means an exaggerated metaphor, as known to the world at large, 'not letting someone sleep' was one of the most effective means of torture out there.

If Kyouko-san was on the verge of nodding off, I would call out at my discretion, at times making a loud thump to impede her sleep... the first time, "Thank you, Kakushidate-san. That was a life-saver," it was a deed she thanked me for, but along the way, it changed nature to her simply glaring at me with reproachful eyes.

Brewing coffee, and preparing food heaped with spices to provide a strong stimulation was my job as well... If it was to keep Kyouko-san awake, then if my hands were free, I would heartlessly use every means at my disposal. Of course, it was more of a tragedy for the one who had to eat it, but... continually torturing the girl I admired, harassing her, being hated, detested, despised by her... I had never experienced a job this hellish in my life. No matter what charges were placed on me, it never made me this nauseous.

Of course, this was something Kyouko-san herself wished for, proposed and planned out. Kyouko-san had surely resolved for it the very moment she took up this job... I was the one lacking in resolve. I didn't write my oath on Kyouko-san's right arm with such intentions. When she was usually so cheerful and good natures, to make her hate me like this... no, even so, if that's all there was to it, I would still be able to endure. The real problem was that I was starting to hate Kyouko-san.

With her physical and emotional state at their very limit, I knew in my head I shouldn't take all her speech and conduct at face value, but even as I worked just as she told me, when she continued taking on such a thorny attitude, the inside of my heart couldn't stay serene. Unfortunately, Kakushidate Yakusuke wasn't a young man of such angelic nature.

She had saved me from peril time and again, I'd been in her care so many times, no matter how much I thanked her, it wouldn't be enough, and yet, for my feeling towards her to become so defiant, it was so painful it just became sad… no, to be honest, I didn't have the leisure to feel pained.

It's just, Kyouko-san's irritated attitude irritated me.

Could a lack of sleep truly steal a human's sanity to such an extent… to think I would find Kyouko-san detestable. As a result, the air of the Okitegami Detective Agency's reception room had become terribly awkward, and extremely difficult to endure… While I had experienced an awkwardness at Sunaga-sensei's villa the other day, this was a mood that didn't even warrant comparison.

On that small trip, I was happy to see a private side of Kyouko-san I had never seen before, but… I could call this environment the exact opposite. Seeing a side I didn't even want to see, holding feelings I never wanted to hold. I had to keep watching on as Kyouko-san was cornered by her work, and off all things, pushing her even further into a corner and ruining her was my role. Even if she said she wanted a break, there was no way she could say it… breaks weren't permitted to the forgetful detective Kyouko-san. The only rest she could get came after the case was resolved.

If I wasn't a side character but Watson, I could work alongside Kyouko-san as her partner, but unfortunately, it didn't seem like I could fulfill that role… even if I wanted to, this was the most I could do. From the start, this was a job unfit of a man like me.

"Kakushidate-san. My coffee cup is empty. You really are inconsiderate."

The usual Kyouko-san would never say that last sentence, but as I was also dangerously sleepy, there was no means for me to refute, and as she demanded, I silently prepared a refill.

"Kakushidate-san. Could you pinch me a bit?"

"… Eh?"

As I returned from the kitchen with a cup brimming with coffee, wiping her face with a wet hand-towel, Kyouko-san made a demand in a low voice… with my drowsiness, for a moment, I couldn't understand her meaning.

"The waves of sleepiness are quite nearing the limit. Please give my cheek a strong pinch."

"Y-your cheek…"

If it was to keep her up, I thought the arm or the back of her hand might be better, but I couldn't damage the hands she used to read the books.

"Please hurry up. If aye dyon't overcome this sleepinyess, all my work will be wastyed…"

Her voice was indeed on the verge of repose… she was slurring her words, and once her pronunciation went down the drain, it really was about time. I didn't have time to hesitate. But. Still. My resistance to pinching a woman's face was strong after all. But Kyouko-san,

"I also wish to punish myself for taking on such an arrogyant and insolent attitude tyowards you, when you're just trying to hyelp. Please."

She strengthened her request… and continued on as if to pressure me.

"Have you forgotten what you wrote on your employment contryact?"

When she said that much, I couldn't decline. In the first place, without any real resolve, without thinking it would come to this, it's my fault for writing up a contract like that. After readying myself, I grabbed one of Kyouko's cheeks in each hand

"Yesh. Nyau prease sthay like thish a whiau."

As a result, not only was she throwing in random ys, she was now failing to pronounce almost everything else. But it seems this was more effective than I thought, and ever since I started pinching Kyouko-san's cheek, the pace of her reading marathon slightly recovered.

Because she would get used to it if I continued pinching the same place, I changed the location of the fold, her nose, eyebrows and eyelids, to summarize, I continued touching parts of Kyouko-san's face… well, having your face touched might just be unpleasant, so I'm sure it would have an effect as a wake-up call, but it didn't resolve the problem that Kyouko-san hated me. More so, it was only earnestly worsening it… but at that time, with the desire to end this job as soon as possible, if it would make Kyouko-san's reading steady, then that was fine. I thought such negligent thoughts.

But this wakeup only remained effective until Kyouko-san's waking time exceeded one hundred hours. From there on came the fourth night… as far as I knew, the fourth night onwards was uncharted territory for Kyouko-san, and to be honest I ended up falling asleep a number of times. I nodded off still pinching Kyouko-san's cheeks, so when I collapsed over her, I ended up slamming her into the coffee table, and as a result, both of our drowsiness was blown away, a lucky punch, surely, but naturally, that good luck wouldn't continue forever.

In truth.

Kyouko-san was so weary on the fifth day I couldn't bear to look at her… "Let's stop this already, Kyouko-san," I finally had no choice but to say.

"This job was impossible from the start. Even if you read books in that state, the contents won't enter your head… I'll put in a word to Kondou-san."

"Wai cyan't… abwandon ith."

She was speaking through pinched cheeks, but even if I released these hands, I got an inkling her articulation would be just as bad.

“A job… I’ve accepted… to the end…”

I’ll carry it through, said Kyouko-san.

Those words alone were so strong I couldn’t imagine she had remained awake over a hundred hours… but at that point, her hands turning the pages were barely moving.

I turned my eyes to the few books remaining of the mountain… my consciousness was also rather empty, so it was difficult to count them, but around… ten books remaining? Blowing through one hundred hours (or was it more) and reading this much was quite a feat… but, in her state, she wouldn’t be able to finish another book, no, another line.

I don’t get it.

Just what could it be that’s giving Kyouko-san so much willpower? When she said the reason she became a detective ‘doesn’t exist’… like this, it’s almost as if she’s one of those eccentric great detectives who devote their entire being solely towards solving mysteries. If you took away Kyouko-san’s keywords of ‘forgetful’ and ‘fastest’, I was sure Kyouko-san was the common-sense type, but…

“I-in the first place, just reading them isn’t enough, Kyouko-san. You have to read them and do deductions on top of that… you head isn’t even turning anymore, is it?”

“Hyow… wude. Aye… dnyahyaba theowy.”

Dnyahyaba? Wait which is it? Was that I do have a theory, or I do not have a theory? From the context, I assume she does, but I’m dubious whether or not I have the aptitude to read context in my state.

“Dyon’t worrya ‘bout it, just shyut up and pinch my cheeks lyike aye told you to… pwease don’t stick your mouth where it dyousen’t belown…”

Kyouko stood as she said… the sofa invited in drowsiness, so from a while back, Kyouko-san got to kneeling on the floor. It seems she had lost the feeling in her legs, so teetering like a newly born deer, she started walking off in some direction.

“Kyouko-san, where are you going?”

“I’m going to go take a shower… come to think of it, I haven’t washed my body for more thanya whole day. For me to stay with a man so long without so much as changing, hyow imyodesth…”

In that case, I was practically on the same conditions, but perhaps a woman would care more about that sort of thing. A splash of water should open her eyes, and I had no reason to stop her… even if a break was impossible, a refresh was necessary.

“Please prepare dinner by the time I get back…? Dinner? Midnyight snack? Breakfast? … Well, whatever it is, ‘slong as its edible. Use the kitchen however you want… did I already tell you that? … the back room is my bedroom, you definyitely can’t go there, okay?”

“I see… understood.”

My head wasn’t turning either so I simply nodded, but in hindsight, Kyouko-san said something unnecessary there… she shouldn’t have touched on the room in the back. Even if they aren’t told, an adult with discretion wouldn’t arbitrarily rummage through someone’s office, sometimes even dreading what they might find. By cautioning, she only drew more attention to it.

It was an un-Kyouko-san-like mistake, but Kyouko-san on her fifth day was much too sleepy for me to label it as one… that being the case, while hearing that did make me curious, I wasn’t a man of such burning curiosity that I would peer in, and to be honest, I didn’t have the energy.

I simply went to the kitchen as told, readily preparing two peoples' worth of food… the food in the ingredients in the refrigerator were about to run out, so I would have to find the timing to go out to buy them.

It was dangerous to go out and leave Kyouko-san alone (she might fall asleep in that timeframe), so when the time came, we'd both have to get our appearances in relative order to go out shopping together…

Rather, in my condition, I wasn't confident how much longer I could handle a knife and fire… then preparing some ready-made meals beforehand would be… no, if that's how it's going to be, wouldn't takeout be fine? Guess that's not happening, when I think of how high the building's security is, the amount of effort it would take to pick up takeout would be… with such things going through my head at length, I finished up some dinner or midnight snack or breakfast or whatever.

At first I had set out for an 'Extreme spicy finish that can snap anyone awake', but there was no longer such a need… because my delirious flavoring was already becoming crazy enough.

And there.

There for a moment, my consciousness cut off.

Wrong, it wasn't a moment… after I carried the plates to the table, as I sat on the sofa to stretch out my body that was grating all over the place, it seems I fell asleep again.

What's more, it wasn't just a moment or two, of all things, the hour hand of the clock had advanced a while ninety degrees… I leapt up. Unlike Kyouko-san, I had fallen asleep a few times, but three hours wasn't enough to shake off four nights of lost sleep, and in my panic, it wasn't the time for such thoughts.

If Kyouko-san had fallen asleep while I was out, then all her effort to that point would be for nothing, and it wasn't just Kyouko-san's effort. All the time I'd persevered through the hatred of the woman I was fond of would

dissolve into sea foam as well. There was no way I wouldn't panic… but, across the table, I couldn't hear the sound of Kyouko-san's sleepers' breath.

I pat my chest in relief… before long an even greater panic thrust me into motion. Sleepers' breath or not, she wasn't across the table to begin with.

Huh?

Where did she go? My memories wouldn't connect up a moment's notice… had she gone out somewhere? No, she hadn't laid a hand on the food on the table… and it didn't seem her reading had made any progress.

I stood… of course, it was dangerous to come to a conclusion with all the information laid out before me. I could think up too many possibilities for what happened while I was asleep… but in this situation, I could only think up the worst possible possibility.

Leaving the reception room, I made for the bathroom on the third floor of the building. Kyouko-san left saying she would take a shower three hours ago, and it was the place she hadn't returned from.

"Pardon me."

I opened the door without knocking. It would be a disaster if it was my misunderstanding, but in the first place, a normal person doesn't stay in the shower for three hours… if within that, Kyouko-san was still there, then I would already call it a disaster, or a situation that wasn't normal. My bad premonition hit spot on… Kyouko-san was collapsed. Naked she lay over the tiles, without even trying to avoid the cold water coming out the shower head, she let it bathe her body. Perhaps she thought that would be best to wake her up, as she chose not hot water but cold for her shower… the color of her skin was beyond pale, it had become ghastly.

But Kyouko-san had no consciousness. She was in a deep, deep… sleep.

"Kyouko-san!"

I bitterly cried out… as far as my voice would go, I called for a detective.
There was no response.

(Pardon me Kyouko-san — Case Forgotten)

Chapter 5:

Farewell, Kyouko-san

1

Can a human body remain unscathed after bathing in cold water for three hours? It's been said that one can drown to death even by lying in a puddle, but… Seeing Kyouko-san stretched across the shower floor, my first action was to leap in and cease the spout from the shower head.

When turning the faucet, my back was also momentarily bathed in cold water, and even that instant held the sort of cold to freeze my body over—so Kyouko-san's entire body was continually bathed in this temperature for a while three hours?

"Kyouko-san! Get a grip on yourself!"

I tried calling out again, but there was no answer after all… rather than white, her sopping wet follicles looked closer to silver. I couldn't feel any signs of life. Thinking the worst, I gently tried touching Kyouko-san's neck… thank god, there was a pulse.

Listening carefully, I could also hear a sleeper's breath. It seems she simply ran out of strength and fell asleep. Perhaps four nights far surpassed Kyouko-san's limit… she was sound asleep.

I felt some relief… but as there was no way I had any medical knowledge, I had no way of telling whether the pulse I felt from my fingertip was strong or weak, or arrhythmic—all I could tell was that I shouldn't carelessly move her; while that may sound contradictory, I couldn't leave her like this, and there was something I could only do here.

I had to wipe off her body and warm her.

"Ah…"

It was there that I finally- late as it may be- realized that Kyouko-san was completely stark naked… I hurriedly averted my eyes from the radiance.

She was taking a shower, so yeah, it was only natural she was naked, but if Kyouko-san happened to open her eyes in this situation, it would make for a huge ruckus. Even with the present state as hectic as it is, if Kyouko-san woke up now… if a Kyouko-san who had forgotten yesterday, rather, all her memory from the past four days woke up now.

From her perspective, she would suddenly be alone in a bathroom with an unfamiliar man (giant), naked… outrageous. It was a situation that might kill the weak of heart from the shock.

Then rather than forcibly regaining Kyouko-san's consciousness, letting her sleep would surely make it easier to nurse her… additionally, if she had collapsed at her physical limit after four waking nights, she shouldn't wake up that easily…

What's more, if only once, for a moment, she fell asleep, all the reading up to now… there was no changing the fact that her detective work to that point had been ruined. There was already no regaining what was lost.

In that case, I'd like to let her have some sound sleep… honestly, I personally couldn't stand to look at such a grumpy, snappy Kyouko-san any longer.

Going back to the basics, there was something unreasonable about her plot to read one hundred books at once without a wink of sleep… I had thought that with Kyouko-san's reading pace, it wouldn't take that much time, but I was naïve. We could think about what we would do henceforth to a later date, now was the time for rest.

That being the case, I couldn't leave Kyouko-san naked like that; I momentarily left to the changing from to search for a bath towel and a change of clothing. I found the towel swiftly enough, but I couldn't find a change… come to think of it, when she went off to the shower, Kyouko-san was empty-handed. Perhaps her drowsiness had it slip her mind… it was an oversight unbefitting of Kyouko-san, or rather, she really must have been at her limit.

But, even if that was the case, the ragged clothes and underwear she had been wearing for over a day should have been somewhere around, but… looking about, I spotted then twisted up in the drum of a laundry machine set at the side of the dressing room.

Ah, so that's how it is…

Even if Kyouko-san didn't fall asleep during her shower, that would be quite a dilemma in itself, I thought, as I momentarily wrapped a large bath-towel around her. In the first place, I had to wipe off her body soaked in cold water, and in that instance, not touching Kyouko-san's body at all would be impossible… so while I was somewhat enveloped in a sense of guilt for assaulting Kyouko-san in her sleep, this was surely not the right situation to fight against the weakness in my heart. My highest priority should be to preserve Kyouko-san's vital signs.

Yeah, that's right. What happens to me and the like doesn't matter… now isn't the time to put on airs and talk about my qualifications as Kyouko-san's assistant or anything like that.

Whatever the case, I had to save Kyouko-san.

I considered filling the bathtub with hot water and submerging Kyouko-sans' body in it, but I heard taking a bath was something that consumed stamina in itself… It would be better to let her rest at ease in her bed.

A single bath towel wasn't enough to wipe her entire body I took up another, a hand towel to wrap up her hair. While I had no medical knowledge, but in the past- of course, for a very short period before I was fired- I managed to find a job related to nursing, and it looked like that was proving of some use… I thought of myself as a hopeless guy who couldn't help but be thrown from job to job, but seeing that knowledge prove useful like this, it kinda felt like some reward.

"Mn…?"

When it came to wiping down Kyouko-san, I tried my best directing my attention so as not to look at her body, but if I wanted to nurse her, it would be impossible for it to never enter my vision at all… my head had cooled down considerably to boot, and enough wisdom was circulating for me to take off my cold, soaked jacked, but it was there that I nodded.

Here and there on her bare-naked body, there were words written in with permanent magic marker… as expected of permanent marker, even with five days since they were written, and a three hour shower, they weren't washed away.

My contract written on her right arm, the contents of this time's job on her left… on her stomach was her 'good idea', and right above that idea was a line I had seen before, 'I am Okitegami Kyouko. 25 years old. Head of Okitegami Detective Agency. White hair, wear glasses. Memory resets every day.' Her self-description.

I already knew Kyouko-san left records over her own body… but the problem was the sentence written on her left, inner thigh. 'When was the release date for The Cob of the Corn?'

…?

Comparing it to the other passages, it was undoubtedly Kyouko-san's handwriting, but it was a sentence I completely failed to grasp the intent of… when did Kyouko-san even have the time to write on herself? 'The Cob of the Corn' was the name Kyouko-san gave to Sunaga-sensei's posthumous manuscript… it was a tentative title she thought up on the spot when I asked, so Kyouko-san would have to have written it on her own left leg sometime after that.

I recalled when she told me to pinch her cheeks. By that time, I was already considerably sleepy, so I wasn't thinking properly, but while it was definitely bad for me to pinch her arm or leg as it might get in the way of her reading, before pinching her face, wouldn't her leg come to mind first?

But that wasn't how it went, Kyouko-san put her best foot forward by the letter and told me to pinch her cheeks… was that to open writing space on her legs if the time came?

Meaning this sentence… 'When was the release date for The Cob of the Corn' was most likely something Kyouko-san who doesn't take memos wrote in the midst of the case, a hint towards resolving the incident…? Sensing her own drowsiness was reaching its limit, even if she adhered to her office's strict duty of confidentiality and didn't write anything direct, she still left a message behind for her tomorrow's self…

That would be… much too tragic.

Without any exaggeration, under a situation where drowsiness threatened her own life, being in a condition where she couldn't maintain a decent personality, even so, without losing her vector towards the case's resolution, she fulfilled her way as a detective…

Even if she hadn't fully read through Sunaga-sensei's one hundred works, there must have been 'something' she noticed along the way… come to think of it, before she headed to the shower, she said she had a theory or something (dnyahyaba one, to be more precise). She definitely uttered it in her dream-like state.

But the release date…? What meaning did the release date to an unpublished work hold? I couldn't see it in the slightest… grounded in her business ethics, she wrote it in a way that no one else could understand, so that went without saying…

The release date… would Kondou-san know it? No, right now, that's the least of my troubles. Carrying Kyouko-san out of the bathroom takes first priority. The permanent marker message that endured a three-hour shower, I doubted it would disappear from a bit of hard rubbing as I wiped down Kyouko-san's body front and back.

I couldn't fully dry off her hair with a towel, but even so, I at least managed to return it from silver to white… there, I embraced her from below and hoisted her up. This freakishly large body I got from my

parents stands out, and people always fear it, there was never a good thing about it, but at that moment, I was simply thankful. My body was made big so I could save a precious person at a time like this, I got around to thinking.

Of course, even if that wasn't the case, Kyouko-san's body was small and light enough to lift with ease… she was sleeping so feebly in my arms, I couldn't imagine this was the great detective who had resolved innumerable difficult cases. I had been entrusting my entire body's weight and then some onto this small build, I realized it for the first time supporting her up myself.

"…"

There were plenty of things to think and mull about, but… putting them all on the shelf, I carried Kyouko-san out of the bathroom… umm? I get the feeling I've definitely heard out where her bedroom was supposed to be… right, in the back of the reception room…

I held close a sound-asleep Kyouko-san, heading for that room… I only recalled her telling me 'you definitely can't go there' once I had turned the doorknob, opened the door, and stepped into the room.

Nonetheless, even if I remembered it earlier, in an emergency, I don't think I would honor that warning… and while I didn't want to say it, the room I stepped into was by all accounts a normal bedroom.

It wasn't so messy she wouldn't want anyone to catch sight of it, and there were no bizarre collections she wouldn't want anyone seeing… it was a cleanly kept private room.

You could also call it a let-down… a king-size bed, and a large flat screen tv embedded in the wall. An audio setup that could play records as well, and the latest model desktop PC. An antique closet, and a frieze carpet… upon closer inspection, her assortment of fixtures and accessories was scrupulous, in no way as dreary as the reception room. In that sense, it wasn't normal, it was nonchalantly luxurious, keenly conveying the sense

the room was designed with good taste, but that only made it all the more confusing why she emphasized I definitely couldn't come in.

More so, if she showed me such a wonderful room, my favorability impression of Kyouko-san that had hit rock bottom would have shot up considerably… or could it be, regardless of whether it was tidy or not, Kyouko-san was the sort of person who didn't want others to tread into her room? Even if it's natural for a woman to not let a man she's not very close to into her room so easily, why did she go out of her way to stress and convey such an obvious fact to me?

Was she just so sleepy she said something that went without saying… whatever the case, if the room was tidy, there was no problem. I lay Kyouko-san's small body on the bed. From there, I undid the bath towel anew and wiped off her body… just to make sure.

A glance back and as her head sank into the thick-plumed pillow, I found her expression considerably softer than when I discovered her in the bathroom. Her complexion had somewhat improved, and it looked as if she was simply sleeping in peace- though a peaceful rest might be the sort of expression to express death, in this case, I meant it word for word.

She was soundly asleep.

Patting my chest in relief, I finally felt at ease… I took what felt like the first breath in a long while. I didn't know what was going to happen back there, but it was appropriate to say the dilemma had crossed its peak.

No, I guess not?

While Kyouko-san's life was in no serious danger, this was a huge loss in regards to her memories… recognizing that once more, my feelings fell into despair. With this she had completely forgotten the contents of all the Sunaga-sensei books she spent four nights up reading.

Having five days' worth of work returned to ash, even simply looking at it from the side, it was a truth that made me feel an extraordinary sense of

helplessness. This couldn't be cleaned up with the word reset. And the one in question who had done all the work- Kyouko-san must be… no, Kyouko-san would never be able to feel that emptiness. Because she would even forget the toil of five days reading.

… Thinking of it that way, how frail could this person be.

An instable detective set up over unreliable footing… thought I.

The fastest detective. The forgetful detective.

On top of that, she was actually proficient, exceedingly assertive, and fearsomely sharp… but if she was any other of the countless sorts of detectives, no, even if she wasn't a detective, given the time, anyone could read one hundred books. Whether they could discern any conclusion that would resolve the case aside… if it was just reading, even I could do it. Even if five days was impossible, I could do it in two months. But Kyouko-san could not.

Kyouko-san only has today.

But still, that's precisely why Kyouko-san has to be a detective over all else… a job where she can make use of her special characteristic must be hard to come by. Why did she become a detective… what an idiotic question. There's no way there could be a reason… I mean, if she wasn't a detective, how would Okitegami Kyouko live on?

Not strong enough, not kind enough.

Kyouko-san could only be a detective.

I was dragged into difficult cases, with all sorts of allegations draped over me, and each time I relied on Kyouko-san… and each time my hands were so full of myself I had failed to see a single thing about Kyouko-san.

"…"

While I say I didn't see, snap. Before I realized it, I was normally looking at the still-naked Kyouko-san as she lay over the bed… it wasn't the time to gulp, if I was done wiping her down, I needed to dress her up with haste.

There were surely undergarments and pajamas in that closet- and after that, I just had to let her sleep at ease until she naturally awoke. In that timeframe, I'd prepare a proper meal for Kyouko-san's sake… I had worked part-time as a line cook before, and it was about time for me to show my true mettle. And after that…

"……"

After that… Kyouko-san would get back to her job… wouldn't she. She'd look at the memo on her left hand, remember- no learn- the contents of her job, feel ashamed of herself for carelessly falling asleep, and reread Sunaga-sensei's complete works from book one… wouldn't she. She would look at her bright idea, her left hand, and ask me to stand on watch once more. Would it become so awkward and grating for me again? Would she snap harshly at me as she mournfully read her books?

Would she painstakingly read the books of her favorite author?

No, to be more precise, it was difficult to say she was starting from square one. They're that vanishing message that just barely remained from yesterday's Kyouko-san. But… even that is nothing more than a theory, and I doubt there would be any change in her means of reading one hundred books in order to verify it.

In the end, Kyouko-san would try reading one hundred books again, running out of strength around book eighty… she's collapse, forget, and repeat once over. No, even if the memories were lost, it's not as if her stamina would recover, so next time she'd be able to read ten to twenty books tops.

In that case, it was a completely wasted effort.

In that case, Kyouko-san would be better off withdrawing from this sort of job… but she wouldn't give up on a job she's accepted so easily. Even when pushed to the brink, Kyouko-san never tried to give up on reading… she continued being a detective to the verge of collapse. What's more, if she's going to forget the very pain she went through, then no matter how the likes of me tries to persuade her… wait?

Wait.

I lowered my eyes onto Kyouko-san once more. It's not that I wanted to see her nudity… I focused my eyes on the letters written all over her body.

That's right.

There it is.

There is just one thing.

Inept as I may be… the one thing I can do for Kyouko-san.

2

If I was going to do it, I would be thorough with it… of all else, I was dealing with a detective of seldom-found quality. A great detective. What's more, in a sprinting match, you could say she was top in the world, a great detective of fearsome wit. And peculiar dishonesty or schemes on my part would be seen through faster than anything.

If I wanted to deceive a great detective, I…

Would thoroughly… need to become a culprit.

… Ironically, starting with Kyouko-san, after being saved by so many detectives and having them clear up my false charges, I was finally challenging a great detective upfront.

But do it I would.

I couldn't think of any other way.

A skillful or well-composed person might be able to think up a wiser means for Kyouko-san's sake, but I wasn't that person. I was awkward, prone to cowering in fear… even so, I wanted to do something for Kyouko-san. I couldn't wait for some skillful composed person to do it for me.

Without making a sound, I stealthily escaped Kyouko-san's bedroom and made for the kitchen… of course, it wasn't for some idyllic story of preparing breakfast for when she awoke. I had already abandoned that idea. The kitchen merely held the tools I needed.

Placed beside the sink, the kitchen detergent. Alongside that, the nearby paper towels; I took the whole roll with me.

Perhaps there was a more appropriate means that would be easier to clean up after, but I wasn't the sort most abundant in information, and as far as I knew, that was the method that would take the least time… namely, in order to erase the permanent marker on her skin.

To cleanly erase them without leaving a trace.

… When writing something, when you carelessly smear ink on your own fingers, it won't come off so easily with water or normal soap, but these sorts of kitchen detergent should remove ink in a short amount of time… probably.

When returning to the room, I naturally didn't knock… by that point, I was already pretty much a criminal, and waking Kyouko-san with such common courtesy would be putting the cart before the horse. I wouldn't call her sleeping beauty, but luckily Kyouko-san had pushed herself quite a bit and showed no signs of waking. I admit I must be simple, as looking at her gentle sleeping face caused my disillusionment from her defiance a few hours ago to fade away… for the sake of this person, I wanted to do as much as I could.

Then now wasn't time to upset that sleeping face, I promptly got to work… if a careless blunder woke her here and now, in a sense, it would be a greater disaster than if she woke up in the bedroom.

I sat to the side of the bed and started by taking Kyouko-san's right arm… if I wanted to go at it in the proper order, perhaps I should have started with the left instead of the right, but what I was going to do was a clear act of betrayal as Kyouko-san's assistant. Then I'd best start off by erasing my handwritten employment contract… I didn't deserve to be Kyouko-san's right-hand man anymore.

Pushing some kitchen detergent out onto a paper towel, I used the moistened paper to wipe Kyouko-san's right arm… the detergent's scent was harsher than I expected. It was a scent I wasn't very conscious of in the kitchen, but… while I doubted she would wake from it, to make sure no evidence remained, it seemed I would have to do another water wipe with a hand towel or something at the end.

When I thought of how many more times I would have to touch Kyouko-san's body, I grew fed up with how far the future seemed, but surely that was what made a perfect crime… I never imagined I would learn the troubles of all the culprits who shifted blame onto me in such a fashion.

Luckily, my book knowledge wasn't mistaken, and the contract on Kyouko-san's right arm disappeared all too easily… as if my oath itself had been a cheap transient thing. No, in truth, that's exactly what it was… I've never heard of an adventure where Watson betrays Holmes this easily.

By revoking the right arm contract, the half-baked portions of my resolve finally hardened up… I understood I had already tread into the realm of no return. I recalled the form of Kyouko-san as she laid bare her rage against the culprit who stole her memory to conceal their crime… but in this instance, that level of anger wouldn't cut it.

Then all the more so, with no oversights… next, I erased the two passages on her torso. I hesitated over whether I should erase the one starting, 'I am Okitegami Kyouko', but seeing how the message was clearly written in a different place than when I saw it at the Sarashina Research Institute, I doubted she kept it written from the time she woke up to when she went to bed.

Come to think of it, she had business cards as well, and Kyouko-san was quite a celeb to those in the know, so in the extreme situation where she fell asleep in town without any information, given time, she should be plenty capable of handling it, identifying herself, and returning to her own office.

It was at most a means to know herself the 'fastest'.

Then in order to emphasize the fact she was not on a job, I should erase it like all the others.

Even so, erasing the letters of 'I am Okitegami Kyouko' somehow felt like I was erasing the proof of her existence, inviting in a fearsome sense of guilt. Similarly, erasing the, 'Have Kakushidate Yakusuke(Giant) wake

you', felt like I was openly betraying her trust, and my heart screamed out all the way.

The man you trusted is betraying you right now, I wanted to shake Kyouko-san awake and tell her- but a coward like me couldn't take up such sincere action.

Wiping her body with paper towel, unlike drying her off with towels, conveyed the complete sensation of touch to me… through that, I learned that Kyouko-san's stomach had barely any excess fat. It felt as if I was directly touching her abdominal muscles… but rather than Kyouko-san maintaining model-like proportions, from what I could see from the build of her legs and arms, it seemed more accurate to say she had been pushing herself these past few days.

Erasing letters from her abdomen was similar to tickling her stomach, and I thought Kyouko-san might notice if I didn't keep up the most prudent of prudence, but luckily, she at most twitched once or twice… instead of rubbing, strongly scrubbing, gently wiping as if to stroke was most effective. It was the same as washing tableware. To think my experience in a kitchen would prove useful here.

The letters on her abdomen completely gone, without any rest, I circled around the bed and went to erasing the passage on her left arm. 'A job pertaining Sunaga Hirubee-sensei. Important. Start tomorrow, 9:00AM'… that was the blast from the past I needed her to forget most.

Kyouko-san never accepted this job.

She never started it.

She was never crushed, she never ran out of power… so she doesn't have to do that unreasonable request anymore. She doesn't have to spend her nights up reading… she can forget.

Tomorrow's Kyouko-san can.

Wake up as if nothing happened at all.

… I couldn't do anything about five days' worth of exhaustion, I could only pray she woke thinking, 'Whatever case I solved yesterday must have been a difficult one'- compared to erasing the letters on her abdomen, it was easier to control my strength on her arms, and as I had grown accustomed to it, it didn't take much time to erase.

Even so, the whole process took around an hour. With digital data, it only took a press of the delete button. This must be the strength of analog. I expended more paper napkins than I expected… they would become evidence, so I would take them with me. Would I be better off replacing it with a new one and refilling her detergent?

Oh, that was dangerous.

I had just about forgotten… that Kyouko-san left a message on her left leg as well. I naturally wanted to avert my eyes from her nether regions, so I almost overlooked it. 'When was the release date for The Cob of the Corn?' a cryptic line, but that was precisely why those brush strokes might become the key to the case… in that sense, it was the most sinful message to rub out. Erasing it would completely render Kyouko-san's five nights to nothingness—what was I saying so late in the game? Come so far, leaving only that message would be far more cryptic. That's why there was no turning back… even if I left just that passage, it would only come back to torment Kyouko-san.

Thorough, be thorough… down to the last detail.

No matter how great of a mystery author Sunaga-sensei might be, no matter how he was involved with Kyouko-san's offset as a detective, that matter is irrelevant here… whether Sunaga-sensei's death was suicide or not, that did not matter to the current me.

No matter what punishment awaited me for it.

Rather, at present, I already felt like I was suffering a punishment… after doing all this, I would never be able to look Kyouko-san straight in the eye again. From here on, no matter what false charges I'm placed under, no matter how people suspect me, I'll never be able to seek help from Kyouko-san. A traitor like me has eternally lost the qualifications to seek help from her.

It's fine, if it's detectives, I've got more than I can count… but there's only one Kyouko-san.

Farewell, Kyouko-san.

I rubbed off the message on her left leg.

With that, there were no traces of ink over Kyouko-san's body. On my side, it felt like various feelings had been slathered over in a thick magic marker.

3

But that wasn't the end… this was where the perfect crime began. The crime was pretty much complete, and now the work began to conceal it.

In that sense, regardless of whatever else I had to do, I needed to dress Kyouko-san… just how long was I going to let her be naked?

I opened the closet and searched for some clothes. Finding the underwear and pajamas took no time at all. As I thought, Kyouko-san was the bearer of a considerable wardrobe, and she had an adequate selection of both. I faltered for a moment. At first, I thought I'd choose something that would rouse the least suspicion, a natural coordination, but it was almost as if I was making a dress-up doll of Kyouko-san, unnecessarily increasing the criminality of my deeds. I turned back on myself and purposely chose them at random. It was fundamentally impossible for me to imitate Kyouko-san's fashion sense, and it's not like she would be wearing them out. But the pajama set aside, I heard that it was actually more natural to have mismatched undergarments, so I decided to leave it that. Come to think of it, among women, there are apparently those who sleep with a brassiere and those who do not, but there were numerous sleep-purposed bras in her drawer, making me conclude Kyouko-san to be the former.

While I thought wearing a blindfold when changing her might be the gentlemanly thing to do, in my case, after perpetrating so much, if I had to say, it just felt hypocritical; rather, in my nursing job, I never had to help a woman change, so there was no way I could fasten a brassiere while blindfolded.

But once I had finished affixing her undergarments, putting on her pajamas was comparatively simple. Because the side the buttons are on is opposite for men and women, I think it resultantly made it easier for me to fasten them.

By the time I finished dressing her, Kyouko-san's hair had fully dried out, but I was the one sweating all over my body. I wanted to fall asleep

already... like Kyouko-san, even if I was paddling an easier ship, I had gone four nights up as well, and that fatigue wasn't something that could be shaken off with three hours of rest.

Even then, I was practically moving on willpower. Regardless, I couldn't collapse there. You can hold yourself up in your house for the next five years, until you're out of your twenties, so do your best for now, Kakushidate Yakusuke.

I definitely wasn't going lax, but be that as it may, by putting her clothes on, it was certain I had cleared a single flag point. If hypothetically Kyouko-san woke up here, even if the plan was ruined, the fear of the worst possible misunderstanding was gone.

I had no intentions of getting into a slapstick comedy with Kyouko-san throwing allegations at me, and me calling in another detective... I carried the towel and papers I used to wipe Kyouko-san's body out of her bedroom. I would place the towel in the laundry basket in the laundry room, and carry the paper towels off with me... with that, my work in the bedroom was done.

Next was the kitchen, and then the reception room.

Erasing the traces of my cooking... I couldn't restock the fridge's depleted ingredients, but I had to cleanly wash and put away the five-days' worth of tableware for two. I ended up using the kitchen detergent for its intended purpose... what about the food on the reception room table? My failure still on the plate? ... I couldn't throw it in the garbage, I had no choice but to eat two-people's worth on my own. It was a full course of terror. I reaped what I sowed.

Apart from that, the fact a third party... no, the traces a detective assistant had been here needed to be perfectly erased.

While this building was a bundle of security, no matter how hard it was to enter, it wasn't so hard to leave... on the other hand, even if I forgot something, I wouldn't be able to come back to retrieve it, so I would need to exercise the utmost caution.

I left a great many fingerprints around, but I doubted I would have to care about those (apart from on the table and glass) … rather, I shouldn't care about them. I was mainly in the reception room. Then it would be more unnatural for there to be no fingerprints from anyone apart from Kyouko-san.

But what I definitely couldn't leave behind was the heap of Sunaga Hirubee's ninety-nine works… if I left those behind, the rest of my work would all be for nothing. It's Kyouko-san we're talking about. She would end up linking the news of Sunaga-sensei's death with the books left behind, and with one thing leading to another, she would arrive at the job she had been tasked with… that deductive prowess, her instinct as a detective was definitely something I couldn't make light of.

Around two boxes worth… well, it's not an amount I wouldn't be able to lift in one go… I guess my experience in a moving company proved useful there? Goodness me, I guess there's a time and place for everything.

Oh right, Sunaga-sensei's posthumous manuscript… I have to make sure not to forget that. Good grief, while it was something of value, when I thought of how that manuscript started my fall into that situation, I even felt annoyed at it. Of course, to be honest… to speak my honest, indiscrete thoughts, it was hard to just call it an annoyance. Apart from a sense of fulfillment that I could do something for Kyouko-san, it would be a lie to say I felt absolutely no upliftment that someone like me was battling against the great detective Okitegami Kyouko. As if it was finally time for a side character like me to play out their uncalled-for climax… no, I'm sure that was just the high I was feeling upon being pushed to the limit. Let's calm down for a moment.

And by calming down, the wood grain of the reception room floor entered my eyes… it wasn't good to be too neurotic, but would I be better off retrieving the hairs on the floor? I had, per say, been living there for five days… normally, I wouldn't care too much about the likes of hair, but Kyouko-san was completely white-haired. If there were too many black strands around, would it be unnatural after all? But then what should I do? It would take time to pick up every last one, but that being the case, that didn't mean I could use a vacuum… the roar from that thing would wake Kyouko-san.

But with a method that entered my ear when I worked a desk at a cleaning company let me evade that trial… by wrapping packing tape around my hands and creeping around the floor, I successfully retrieved them. The fingerprints were the same, and while I thought it would be unnatural for there to be no traces of anyone in a receptions room, on the contrary, precisely because it was a receptions room she would want to keep it tidy, I thought, so I thoroughly cleaned it from corner to corner.

Obviously, that method picked up Kyouko-san's white hair alongside my own… and naturally, I would need to take the packing tape back with me, that act felt just a little stalker-ish, sending me into a spiral of self-loathing. Swearing I would discard it in a public dumpster along with the paper napkins on the way back, I finally finished up with the kitchen and reception room.

Finally, I brought the towel to the dressing room… it was there I went pale. I saw the wet jacket there and went pale. I had completely forgotten how I was bathed in cold water retrieving Kyouko-san and had stripped it off. That was dangerous, how could I call it a perfect crime if I left such clear traces… I can feel Professor M's disappointment.

I had just left it on the floor, so the jacket was only half-dry, but, well, I had no problems wearing it… and when I thought of how the charges on me weren't all wet this time around, I could put up with it.

Just in case, I checked in the back as well, but there didn't seem to anything that needed cleaning up… the unpleasant feeling of the wet jacket made me feel like taking a shower before I left, but no matter how I searched, I couldn't find any meaning in going out of my way to do something so stupid that might leave my trace.

Now then…

At that point, there really was nothing left to do. As a culprit, I needed to escape the Okitegami Building without a moment to lose, but before that, I wanted to say farewell to Kyouko-san one more time. While my emotions did come into play, if I didn't confirm Kyouko-san had yet to awake, I wouldn't be able to put my mind at ease.

After quietly peeking into her bedroom, returning was the right decision, or so I paid thanks to my unexpected luck… even if I said that, rather than my luck, I should call it a stroke of good luck for Kyouko-san.

Kyouko-san had turned over in her sleep, embracing her large pillow, out like a light… her sleeping posture wasn't the best, it seems. Well, that went to show how deeply asleep she was, so it wasn't something for me to complain about (In the first place, I don't have any qualifications to say anything about Kyouko-san's sleeping posture), but what I found to my luck was the room's temperature.

With the season, the room's temperature had yet to go as far as cold. But Kyouko-san had been continually submerged in cold water up to a moment ago. Her body temperature had surely fallen considerably… her sleeping posture that paid no heed to her blanket would usually be a pleasant scene, but on top of her body temperature, I couldn't overlook it.

In a building so fully outfitted, there was no way her room had no AC… I looked around the entrance door. As I thought, on the wall right next to the light switch, the remote for the AC was embedded.

I doubt she leaves the AC on when she sleeps normally… but if she sets it to cut off in an hour by timer, then even if she wakes up sometime along the way, she shouldn't find it strange. Luckily, that AC unit was the sort that didn't make a sound when it started up, so I didn't have to worry about Kyouko-san waking up from it… I used my knowledge from working an appliance store as I set the temperature to twenty-six and changed the AC to heat.

Ah, come to think of it, I never checked the location of the AC unit itself. If it blew directly onto Kyouko-san, it might conversely make it difficult for her to sleep, so do I have to alter the vent direc… tion? I didn't see it anywhere. Ah, that's wrong, this model was the sort that's buried in the ceiling, was it… there, I shifted my eyes straight up.

And… I found myself at a loss for words.

The ceiling.

That's right, ever since I entered the room, I had never once looked up at the ceiling… Sure enough, a cutting-edge air conditioning unit was embedded there. None of its air holes were positioned to bother Kyouko-san as she slept on the bed… and in hindsight, there's no way a bed would be positioned right in the way of an air conditioning's wind.

That's why… I should never have looked at the ceiling. The reason being, the air conditioning wasn't the only thing on it.

I knew.

The true meaning of her words when Kyouko-san told me I could definitely never enter this room. It was spelled out in thick, black, paint across the ceiling.

'From today onwards, you are Okitegami Kyouko.
You will live as a detective.'

Those rough brush strokes… no matter how I looked at them, were not done by Kyouko-san's hand.

4

Once I had finished disposing of everything at the scene, the last bus had already left. I didn't have enough on hand to take a taxi (There was no way I could receive my salary as an assistant), so I had no choice but to return carrying two cardboard boxes full of books… honestly, that might have been the harshest part of the job.

At the end of a few hours' march, I returned to my apartment and finally slept like a log… but that wasn't the end either. Even if the crime scene was taken care off, there was someone whose story I had to get straight if I wanted to pull off a perfect crime.

It went without saying I meant the direct client in this case, Kondou-san… it was already past noon by the time I awoke the next day, but I instantly made a call to Kondou-san's phone and made an appointment. He had consecutive meetings that day, so if I was fine with a gap in-between them, he'd make some time… was the matter, and I assented that I was fine with that and prepared to head out.

By that time, I was sure Kyouko-san had opened her eyes… how was she? What thought ran through an awakened Kyouko-san's head? Would my childish destruction of evidence truly work on a great detective?

… That was already gone and done with, there was no use mulling over it. It was impossible for me to repent on my failings and redo. So for now, I could only do what I was capable of… the boxes of Sunaga-sensei's books in tow, I changed onto the bus to Sakusousha.

On that day, for the first time.

I pressed the stop button on my own.

"… Now this is a surprise."

Kondou-san told me after hearing out my story at Sakusousha's staff canteen. I spoke apologetically.

"Yeah, I have to apologize to you, it was my arbitrary decision. But…"

I started to vindicate myself, but, "No, that's not it. What I'm surprised about is how skillfully you were able to carry out a crime," Kondou-san lightly laughed.

"I always found it a mystery why everyone unanimously directs the eyes of suspicion at a good-natured man like you, but good gracious, the mistaken one might have been me. Don't you think you might have a criminal nature rivaling that of a great detective?"

"D-don't even joke about something like that, Kondou-san. Even recalling it now, I was trembling with fear last night… I haven't the slightest idea why I was able to take such bold action."

That wasn't to say I had told Kondou-san every little detail about my offense. If I told him everything, Kondou-san would become an accomplice… of course, there was that practical reason to it as well, but I had an extraordinary resistance to telling him how I retrieved a naked Kyouko-san from the bathroom. For the sake of Kyouko-san's honor, that's something I should keep under especially tight wraps.

To the end, I only roughly explained that I nursed Kyouko-san who had collapsed after four nights without sleep, and erased all traces of the job from the scene… and naturally, I didn't say a word about that message on her bedroom ceiling.

"Anyway… Kondou-san. I want you to make it so this request never happened. For Kyouko-san who only ever has today, it was an impossible request from the start. If you need it done at all costs, I'll take responsibility and introduce you to a different detective."

"No, there's no need, Yakusuke. I withdraw the request… now that it's come to this, that might actually be for the best."

“? What do you mean it’s for the best?”

“To tell you the truth… while you were working with Okitegami-san, there was a movement on our side. It’s the will of Sunaga-sensei’s bereaved family, so to speak… they’re pressing us to see if we can make Sunaga Hirubee’s death out as a suicide.”

“…?”

I couldn’t understand what he meant… no, perhaps I just didn’t want to understand, but as I was slow on the uptake, Kondou-san offered further explanation.

“Meaning, not just publish Sunaga-sensei’s final manuscript as his final work, they want to send it into the world in that form… if it’s the ‘Posthumous work of an author who committed suicide’, it will advertise itself, and it will certainly have an effect as a sales pitch.”

“… His bereaved family didn’t have the best relationship with him. That Sunaga-sensei.”

Giving a blunt response was the most I could do.

“I wonder. I told you before, but to an author, suicide isn’t necessarily a dishonorable end… if you want me to speak removing my emotions and public stance, if we announce it under that representation, I guarantee Sunaga-sensei’s name will rise.”

“… But.”

I grasped for words… I recalled what Kyouko-san told me. His new work, his posthumous manuscript ‘The Cob of the Corn’ was just the usual Sunaga Hirubee… the usual sort of piece you could enjoy while piquing your interest about what he would put out next, so making that the end-all of his writing career was definitely not doing good to Sunaga-sensei.

But I couldn't put that opinion on the chopping block here… Kyouko-san had already stepped down from this job. No, I dragged her down from it… as a detective and as Sunaga-sensei's fan, Kyouko-san's opinion no longer held any weight over the present situation.

I couldn't tell what extent of my thoughts he could read, but Kondou-san went on.

"That's why, if Okitegami-san or another detective poorly—or skillfully investigates and reaches the conclusion 'it was not a suicide', then that verdict and the bereaved family will have us between a rock and a hard place, only bringing us more trouble… if Okitegami-stepped down at this stage, you could say that way would be to our benefit."

He said… there was no way Kyouko-san would step down herself but, well, from Kondou-san's perspective, it was much the same. Her assistant had raised a rebellion, after all… if evaluated as an organization, that was the responsibility of the chief of the office, Kyouko-san.

"… For the sake of Kyouko-san's name, I'll say it as persistently as I have to, Kondou-san. This job was unsuited to Kyouko-san from the start. I wouldn't want you forgetting this was a request neglecting various regulations of the Okitegami Detective Agency. It was a job taking advantage of Kyouko-san's fan mindset–"

"I get it, I get it, don't be so angry. I'll make sure this doesn't lower Okitegami-san's evaluation… if you'll let me make an excuse, even I never thought Okitegami-san would carry out such a heated investigation of reading all one hundred books."

As if to soothe me, Kondou-san vindicated himself… but he did have a point. As she devoted herself to the point of collapse, it was Kyouko-san's failure of self-management that invited in the present state of affairs.

Not doing what you're unable to is the minimum required credence of a working adult… and this time, Kyouko lacked that. Turning it around, that was simply how great of a Sunaga-sensei fan she was, but…

"... Kondou-san. Could you go into some more detail on what you told me before? Kyouko-san set out to become a detective because she read Sunaga-sensei's works—that's what you said. What exactly did you mean by that."

"Ah... that was a slip of the tongue on my part, but now that it's come to this, I guess I can't uphold my silence... during Satoi-sensei's case, do you remember how I asked you if Kyouko-san had ever worked overseas before?"

"Yeah, I do. You told me to forget it, but it left quite an impression."

Kondou-san had once met a person who resembled Kyouko-san while working at a branch overseas, it was that sort of talk.

"I'll be frank, that woman was a die-hard fan of Sunaga-sensei... in the first place, the reason we got into contact was because I was an acquaintance of Sunaga-sensei. It involves the internal affairs of Sakusousha, so I can't tell you everything now that you've taken leave, but... back then, she helped me out quite a bit. You could say that the current me is only here thanks to her."

"Hmm..."

For a man of Kondou-san's caliber to say so much... if the current Kondou-san is here thanks to that person, then indirectly, the current me is also here thanks to her, but was that individual and Kyouko-san really one and the same?

"No, I don't know. I don't think it adds up if I calculate out her age either, I've just said some unreasonable things. I might just be chasing some memories from the past... rude as it may be, perhaps I just saw Okitegami-san overlapping with that person. A part of me requested this job to Okitegami-san in the hopes of confirming that, truth be told."

"I-is that so?"

I thought he was strangely fixated on Kyouko-san… so that was his angle. Perhaps having me invite Kyouko-san out for a date, and choosing Sunaga-sensei's villa as the destination also had that hidden ulterior motive… or perhaps to Kondou-san, that was the main goal, and the rest was secondary.

"T-then in the end, have you found your proof?"

"No, honestly, I'm even more confused than when I started out… that person was definitely a zealous fan of Sunaga-sensei, so when Okitegami-san went as far as breaking her fundamental rule to take on the job, I thought that might be it. I was practically certain that woman looked on her love of Sunaga-sensei's work and decided to become a detective… but she wasn't the sort of rash person who would work herself to collapse, even by mistake…"

And in the first place, that person didn't have a special characteristic of having her memories reset every day… or so Kondou-san wrapped up his explanation. Whittling it down that much, they definitely seemed like different people… but it was possible her memories got around to resetting after Kondou-san returned. In that case, it was even possible she lost her memories of meeting Kondou-san along with the rest.

But even if that was true, the one thing I was certain of was the fact Kyouko-san didn't become a detective out of her love of Sunaga-sensei… the reason Kyouko-san was a detective.

It was written on the ceiling of her room.

'From today onwards, you are Okitegami Kyouko.
You will live as a detective.'

… Waking up every morning, losing the memories of yesterday, she was simply following the first thing that entered her eyes, those orders written by who knows who… but ironically, if she wasn't a detective, the current her wouldn't be able to live on.

“Whatever the case, it looks like I should stop trying to test Okitegami-san… it’s way too dangerous. I’m sorry, Yakusuke. Until the day hell freezes over, I won’t try digging into that person’s past again.”

“Y-yeah… just leave it at that.”

“If you weren’t there, I might have done something I could never take back. From here on, like in this case, you’ve got to continue supporting Okitegami-san. I’m sure she needs an assistant, right?”

“… Kondou-san.”

No, I was the one who did something there was no taking back. I had no intentions of meeting Kyouko-san again… we were never that close to begin with, and if Kondou-san didn’t instigate me, I wouldn’t have invited her on a date either. Now that I had betrayed Kyouko-san, I could never make another job request to her, let alone help her in her work… the moment I was about to say that, I recalled the form of Kyouko-san collapsed in the bedroom.

If she continued to be showered in that cold water, she would have suffered from hypothermia, and might have actually died… what’s more, Kyouko-san would forget that mistake. She was unable to ‘learn by experience’.

Someone had to save her.

… Then would I twiddle my fingers as I continued waiting for that someone to save Kyouk-san… when that prince on a white horse never arrived, did I intend to say it was a pity and call it a day? ‘Someone had to do it’ was the same as declaring ‘I won’t do it myself’… would I make such a declaration to Kyouko-san?

But I couldn’t figure it out. Was what I did this time around really for Kyouko-san’s sake… was my betrayal really for her sake?

"… That's right. Kondou-san. There's one thing I wanted to ask you… if 'The Cob of the Corn' was submitted normally, around when was its planned release?"

"? 'The Cob of the Corn'?"

"Ah, sorry. I'm talking about Sunaga-sensei's posthumous manuscript."

"Hmm… did Okitegami-san name it? It's definitely a fitting title. By the schedule, it was before the spring of next year… it would be released around February. Of course, now that Sunaga-sensei's passed, I think it will be pushed ahead some… his family's will and all."

The will of his bereaved family again… no, an irrelevant outsider like me shouldn't stick in his mouth. I'm sure they're going through a lot with dividing his belongings and inheritance taxes. But even if I believed Kondou-san when he said suicide wasn't necessarily a dishonor to an author, wrongly announcing what wasn't a suicide as one really would be mendacious after all… not as an author but a human being.

"I didn't want to say it, but it's true that the timing was simply perfect for a suicide. Putting a close on his numerous series, his 'The Cob of the Corn' wasn't a new series, it was a standalone. Meaning, he left without leaving any novels incomplete… I can't help but sense some intent."

What happens twice will happen thrice… but third time's the charm, eh?

"That's why, Yakusuke, I think this matter is going to be brought to a close with that… for Sakusousha, of course it's better if the book sells. I'm in a different department and I wasn't directly in charge of him, I'm not in a position where I can open my mouth. In the first place, it was a vague situation that could go either way. As long as no definite evidence comes out to prove Sunaga-sensei's death was not a suicide–"

"Sunaga-sensei's death was not a suicide."

She said.

There… at the table Kondou-san and I sat across one another, brazenly without any objection, someone had taken a seat. She had pulled back the chair without a sound, elegantly lowering herself into it.

A woman of small build. She wore glasses… a woman of white hair.

She wore a stately pair of pants, her shirt was done up to the very top button.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, I’m Okitegami Kyouko.”

The head of the Okitegami Detective Agency, Okitegami Kyouko.

As she unreservedly named herself, she… the detective held a paper cup filled to the brim with black coffee in her hands, giving a vibrant declaration.

“Now let’s get to proving it”

5

At Kyouko-san's sudden appearance, Kondou-san look at me in surprise… as if to say this isn't what we talked about, but the one more surprised at her entrance than anyone was me. I even thought it was one of Kondou-san's set-ups yet again… but from what I could see of his reaction, that wasn't the case.

Calm and collected all on her own, "My apologies, I stopped by the editorial department so I was late to arrive," Kyouko-san said… and she placed the envelope she held under her arm on the table.

"I received this from Konoka-san, and by the time I finished reading it, the clock had already struck… I've kept you waiting."

"This is…"

Kondou-san examined the contents of the envelope, but there was no such need… it went without saying it contained a printout of Sunaga Hirubee's posthumous manuscript, 'The Cob of the Corn'. The one I collected might have been a different copy but from its thickness and the situation…

"It was a wonderful manuscript. For now, let's refer to it as 'Home Sweet Corn'."

Kyouko-san spoke clearly… her provisional title and impression were different. For the impression, it may be because she was putting on airs before Kondou-san, a person of the publishing company, but… was the reason her tentative title changed was because this was 'Today's Kyouko-san'?

If memory serves, Konaka-san was affiliated with the literature department, directly in charge of Sunaga-sensei… I see because he was Kondou-san's colleague, she was able to hear the details. And by editorial department, she meant that one… I didn't make it in time to silence

them… crap, if I had the time to listen to Kyouko-san's supposed past from Kondou-san, I should've had Kondou-san start the cleanup work within the company.

No, in the first place, why was Kyouko-san in the company building… if she brought up her name to Konaka-san who knew the circumstances, she would be able to receive a copy, but before that, she'd have to pass through the reception to enter or…

"That's because I'm a detective. Covert operations are right in my ballpark… If you look like you're supposed to be there, they let you right in. I actually meant to pay Kondou-san a visit, but he was absent for a meeting, so I went to Sunaga-sensei's direct editor Konaka-san. After that, he told me I could find Kondou-san in the staff canteen after he's finished a meeting."

Kyouko-san explained… but while that sounded like an explanation, it really explained nothing. Well, for Kyouko-san, I guess breaching a publisher's firm security wasn't too difficult… rather, was that why she was wearing a pantsuit? With a young woman, it was hard to keep wary, and if she passed through unconcerned, they might just let her through, but what we were worried about was why Kyouko-san was here in the first place.

Turning to me in the height of my confusion, Kyouko-san gave a pleasant smile, "So which one of you is Kondou-san?" she asked. Kondou-san hurriedly raised his hand like a student whose name was called by the teacher. That humorous conduct unbefitting a dandy man contrarily cleared my head.

Her memories were gone… she didn't remember Kondou-san's face or mine. But Kyouko-san knew she had taken up a Sakusousha request that involved Sunaga-sensei's death… she heard it from Konaka-san… that wasn't it. I mean, if she didn't know that, she wouldn't have come around to Sakusousha in the first place. Then in the end, was there an oversight in my treatment of the crime scene?

When she opened her eyes, Kyouko-san sensed something off with her office and made for Sakusousha… no, in that case, that much was fine. I couldn't determine what part of my coverup I had made a mistake in, but now that the situation had come to this, I could only accept it.

However… what I couldn't understand was the air Kyouko-san put on, her bearing as if she had already pinned down the truth of Sunaga-sensei's death. Whatever the case, Kyouko-san ran out of power. That much alone was certain, and by the time she awoke, her memories… five days worth of memory were supposed to have reset. And yet, how did she ascertain the truth?

In a generous estimate of half a day since she opened her eyes, all of Sunaga-sensei's works… you mean to tell me she read one hundred books? That's impossible. If she could do that, she'd have done it from the start. If she read anything it would have to be ten volumes or less… and there's no way she could understand something from that. In the first place, I had carried all of Sunaga-sensei's works off from the Okitegami building… there were supposed to be a number of volumes considerably difficult to obtain among them.

… Was she bluffing?

Even if it didn't go so far as a bluff, just as with the culprit at the Sarashina Research Institute, was Kyouko-san putting on a façade before me and Kondou-san when she was in a state of zero…?

"… You say that Sunaga-sensei's death wasn't a suicide. Of course, you must be saying that with some evidence to back you up, right Okitegami-san?"

"Yes, I never say anything without evidence… I'm a detective, after all."

At Kondou-san's question, Kyouko-san gave a vibrant, brazen answer… I couldn't sense any signs of fatigue, this was the usual Kyouko-san under normal operation.

“But before that, there’s one thing I’d like to confirm… Are you Kakushidate Yakusuke?”

“Eh? Ah, y-yes…”

I stuttered as I answered… with my guilt from betraying her, I couldn’t look her in the eye. I must have looked considerably suspicious… if she identified me as the culprit who killed Sunaga-sensei, I might even end up accepting it.

“Is that so. No, I heard from Konaka-san… it seems you were helping me out in my work. Thank you.”

Konaka-san’s lips are way too loose. No, blaming him won’t get me anywhere… she used her skills as a detective to obtain information, and his lips weren’t even sealed on the matter.

“Ah… n-no, I was never useful enough for you to call it helping out…”

“So I’m sure. More than that, you tried to get in my way.”

Kyouko continued on, her smile unchanging.

… As I thought, she saw through me.

But Kyouko-san repeated her, “Thank you.”

“Because you got in my way… the truth became easier to understand.”

“… Eh? What do you mean…”

“Before we get into that,”

Kondou-san butted in.

“How were you able to tell, Okitegami-san… that we requested an investigation into Sunaga-sensei’s death from you?”

“Mn, um, is that important?”

“It’s important… because our company brought forth the request while appraising you as the forgetful detective. If you are able to maintain your memories without resetting across days, then we would have hired you under false pretenses.”

That was the Kondou-san-style rhetoric. He considered my dismay of having my crime seen through and asked in my place.

“Is that so? Come to think of it, you have a point there… well, whatever the case, if I ever hope to explain the truth, it’s something I’ll have to say. Kakushidate-san.”

Kyouko-san placed a single sheet of paper on the table.

“I’m quite thankful that you cleaned my room for me, but you really shouldn’t leave something this important behind… it’s important evidence.”

A folded piece of paper… as I thought, it was the list of Sunaga Hirubee’s works Kondou-san drafted up. It even courteously spelled out the words ‘Sakusousha Kondou Fumifusa’. That made the reason Kyouko-san dropped by Sakusousha clear… however.

“T-that can’t be… where did you find that?”

“In the dressing room. When I woke up and went to take a shower, I happened to spot it… though I couldn’t tell you why it was lying in a place like that. Do you have any ideas?”

On the contrary, being asked like that, I thought… the dressing room? Sure enough, it was the place that got me into the greatest fluster, but…

was it when I took off my drenched jacket? In the end, I reclaimed the jacket itself, but did it fall out of my pocket at the time… I would never make such an oversight, I'd like to think, but as truth would have it, the paper was in Kyouko-san's hands.

"I rescind my previous statement, Yakusuke. You're incapable of doing wrong."

Kondou-san said with a bitter smile… I had no words, I could only feel ashamed.

"Okitegami-san. Please understand… Yakusuke only did something like that because he worried for your wellbeing. He was by no means attempting to get in your way."

Kondou-san stuck up for me… he really has it together. Though I don't know if he'd still cover for me like that if he knew I recovered a naked Kyouko-san.

"Yes, I'm aware… it seems I pushed myself considerably, and for that matter, you have nothing more than my gratitude."

Or so Kyouko-san said as well… from what I could see of her behavior, her words of gratitude were no fabrication. Judging by her previous statement, she wasn't under the impression she had collapsed in the shower room… in that case, in order to not bring her any unnecessary shame, at the very least, I'd conceal that matter to the end.

"But what did you mean when you said that made it easier to understand? Even when I made off with all of Sunaga Sensei's works."

So I brought the talk towards the case itself. As the greatest outsider, that impatience may have seemed unnatural, but, "There was no need to read the complete works of Sunaga-sensei to begin with," Kyouko-san said.

"To be blunt, just looking at that list was just about enough to resolve the case… it's Occam's Razor. I surmise that because she was Sunaga-sensei's

fan, ‘Yesterday’s Me’s desire to read all of his works was so strong she used work as an excuse.”

“B-but… say what? Just with this list? And how do you figure?”

I had looked through it a number of times, to the end it was nothing more than a list of Sunaga Hirubee’s works… as it was written up by Kondou-san, it had some extra details, but a list was a list. I couldn’t think that alone was enough to understand the truth behind Sunaga-sensei’s death.

“It’s actually possible, see. When I saw this list in the dressing room, it took me a second to notice.”

“A second, is it?”

The fastest detective.

“Please look at this. The important part is… here.”

What Kyouko-san pointed at was the right column of the list… the publication dates specifically. The grid that detailed what day of what month of what year of his career the book had been released. Just gazing at that column let one see the path the author Sunaga Hirube tread over forty-five years, but… what about it?

“Do you see it?”

“I don’t.” “I don’t.”

My voice overlapped with Kondou-san’s. Like a home tutor patiently guiding her student, “For example,” Kyouko-san brought up an example. While I was a different story, taking that attitude with Kondou-san surpassed the realms of shamelessness.

“If the release dates of a certain author all slanted towards a single month… if they were all concentrated on one month a year, wouldn’t you think that author had a strong will to do so?”

The example was so extreme I couldn’t grasp it in an instant… well, of course she was right. We would certainly feel the author in question’s strong fixation on that month without much room for objection. On the contrary, if there was an author who would definitely not publish a book in April, then one might think they were a superstitious person.

“But the publication dates of Sunaga-sensei’s works don’t have that inclination… they’re at random, or rather, with all the works he’s published, they’re scattered throughout all twelve months, or rather…”

“Of course, if you look at this list as a whole, it might seem that way… but what if you divide it? Try splitting it into series and thinking about it like that.”

“Series…”

The twenty-two series Sunaga-sensei carried… meaning each series had a partial release month? Like one series being released on even months, and the other released on odds… I split up work with Kondou-san to confirm it.

During that timeframe, Kyouko-san elegantly sipped her coffee… but the result was none too favorable. Even after we tried totaling them up by series, I couldn’t see any inclination I could call statistically significant. Only the ‘Great Detective Meiko’ series were all released on even months, but perhaps I should look at that as an inevitability of novels written for young boys and girls, there wasn’t much space between releases, putting them down for every other month… you could call it intentional if you wanted to, but rather than the author, that felt like the publisher’s intentions.

“Okitegami-san, I have another meeting to attend to, and it’s not like I have too much time.”

Kondou-san offered a light complaint to the busy work he was put to, but with an innocent look, “My apologies. I just love to see boys hard at work,” Kyouko-san lightly jested.

“Then boorish as it may be, I’ll just come out and say the answer… what’s important is to separate out the series, and look at the works that are left.”

“That are… left?”

“I mean the six standalone books.”

On her words, I looked back at the list… I had definitely overlooked them. I had analyzed each series by release date, but the books that weren’t part of a series could be considered a subdivision In itself. Grouping what wasn’t grouped was yet another group.

The individual novels, six of them.

Starting with his debut, ‘Murder at the River’s Depths’, then ‘The Victim of Mine Eye’ published in his eighth year, and then…

“Ah.”

Each of the six books… they were all released in February.

6

This is… how should I look at it?

Even if one second was an exaggeration, it was definitely a commonality one could find from looking at the list… disregarding one hundred books and forty-five years of writing, and literary style, and genre, it was a commonality one could find just by itemizing it down to pure dreary publication information.

And that was precisely why it might be possible to cut it down as pure coincidence… six of his works just happened to be released in the same month. But while two or three works overlapping was one thing… six of them? By simply calculations, that's one-twelfth times six… no, I don't feel like calculating probability. I can only think he intentionally regulated it.

… Come to think of it, in that one treasure hunt.

As the game of an influential author, in most cases, he would continue giving hints until his editor found it, but in the end, I heard there were some times his works weren't found at all. Even if that was the rare exception, from the production side, I do think that's a crisis that can't be written off as a joke; but could it be that those games were how Sunaga-sensei was regulating the publication dates…?

Why did no one notice such a blatant truth… one might think if it was pointed out, but like hell anyone could notice such a dynamic set up. Over forty-five years, slipped into ninety-nine works… the scale was on a different level, and the era was different. In this day and age, it was easy to take statistics from a digital database, but the great author's years of activity continued ceaselessly through a long period before everything was indexed.

And so… and so?

No, wait. That was an intense leap of logic. This is just connecting up whatever comes to mind… I looked at Kyouko-san. It may have become a look strong enough to call a glare, but Kyouko-san took it lightly and turned it aside.

“My prediction is that this new work… the standalone ‘Home Sweet Corn’ was set to be released around the start of next year, in February.”

She said.

Release date.

That’s right, ‘Yesterday’s Kyouko-san’ was also mindful of that… she wrote a question about the posthumous manuscript’s release date on her left leg. As a valid hypothesis… but she had simply too much information to process, she never got around to proving her theory. For example, she had to confirm, ‘No suicides come out in Sunaga works’ by reading every work individually… no matter how plausible it was, she wouldn’t get around to proving her theory until she finished reading one hundred books. But today’s Kyouko-san was missing that information from the start… that’s precisely why she was able to simply focus her attention on a single point.

Kondou-san nodded.

I heard it a moment ago as well… the release of the new work that was probably going to be pushed forward would originally be in the February of next year.

“Up to the moment I dragged my feet to Sakusousha and heard it from Konaka-san, I had forgotten the contents of my request… but when I saw the list left in the dressing room, what’s this? I thought. The release dates skewed for only the standalones… luckily, I had already read half of his standalone works… I remembered them, so I bought the other half at a bookstore along the way, and had a read through… it was my good fortune they weren’t out of print. And after reading the manuscript I received from Konaka-san, I reached my conclusion…”

Including the manuscript, it was just four books, so I read them in no time. Kyouko-san said—while I doubt she could read four books in no time, compared to reading one hundred, there was a world of difference in the effort required. She got off without rereading the works she remembered, after all…

"… The seven books thought of as standalones are all a single established series centered around a single theme."

"… I'm not really seeing it."

Kondou-san answered with caution. Being the one who made the list, perhaps he was embarrassed at his inability to spot the commonality so he couldn't speak out strongly… even so, as an editor who used to work close to Sunaga-sensei, he had to say what needed to be said.

"In all seven of those works, the protagonist and important characters go without saying, but the themes and genres are also completely different."

"You're right about that. If I didn't read those seven books looking for it, I'm sure I'd have read it that way as well. The reason being, what's consistent among these seven works is… the side character."

With a bang, Kyouko-san placed her left arm on the table and rolled up its sleeve… and with the fine-felt-tipped marker she had taken in her right hand unbeknownst to me, she started writing out the following details.

"In his first work, 'Murder at the River's Depths'… the main character has a sister, and a certain young girl appears as her classmate. She doesn't do anything particularly important, her name doesn't come out. She is simply treated as a friend."

"… Was there someone like that?"

Though Kondou-san tilted his head, "I can understand if you don't remember her… she really didn't do anything particular, and her few lines were all plain. If there was any hint, then it was the fact her alphabetized

seat number was close to the protagonist's sister's, meaning her last name started with something close to 'M'," said Kyouko, "And seven years from the release of 'Death at the River's Depths', in his second standalone 'The Victim of Mine Eye', as the witness to the murder, a single young girl makes an appearance," she continued on her depiction

"Only the name 'Momota' comes out, she is not given any definite description… she is nothing more than the witness, not the 'true culprit' or anything, and after that, she is not given any particularly important role."

"…"

"On top of that, in his third standalone released in the February of nine years later, 'The Life the Angel Treads', the female officer protagonist has a pen pal who goes by 'Kuwata'-san. Their gender is never made apparent, they are there as someone for the protagonist to consult with who isn't related to the crime. In his fourth standalone released the next February, 'Confused Killer', a housewife named 'Asami'-san shows the protagonist detective the way to his destination. In February nine years later, his fifth standalone 'The Flutter Kick Club' has the appearance of someone called the 'receptionist auntie', and another seven years later, in his sixth standalone, 'Chartreuse Boy', the protagonist's children give their seat on the bus to a middle-aged woman called 'Asa-chan'… now, to be released the February of next year, his first standalone in twelve years, we have his posthumous manuscript 'Home Sweet Corn' in which an old farmer lady visits the protagonist's house to share some corn with them."

Kyouko-san's left arm was filled up in no time… with the depictions of the seven side characters who appeared in his standalone works.

"You're telling me these seven… are the same individual"

At Kondou-san's question, "If you look at it like that, it all fits into place," she said.

"And I'm talking about the age. The young female student in his first work became a young woman in his second work eight years later. In his third and fourth works that took place nine and ten years after that, she's in her

thirties… in his fifth work another nine years later, she's become an auntie in her forties, and seven years later, she's a middle-aged woman… twelve years later, she's an old lady in her sixties."

I felt a chill.

It was as if I was staring at a person's life through Kyouko-san's arm… in his standalones, a single character was living their life without catching a reader's eye? Without standing out, unnoticed by all- as a side character?

If that was true, then it was a fact that could only be deduced by reading all seven books in order, keeping an eye out for it… even if she crumbled along the way, Kyouko-san's direction as a detective to read the books in order without backtracking wasn't mistaken.

"Asami-san and Asa-chan are the same person… if you want to presume that, I guess it would be understandable, but Okitegami-san, don't you think to label all seven of them the same is pushing it? Momota and Kuwata are different surnames."

"I'd say she got married."

Kyouko-san paid no heed to Kondou-san's objection.

"As a side character to the story, she was never visited by any major trouble. She made friends, got married, worked, built a household, raised children… over the course of forty-five years, she lived within Sunaga-sensei's works. And that is who… Momota Asami-san is."

"… Even if that is the case, I don't get where you're going. Why did Sunaga-sensei continue to put out that side character in his six- no seven-works that weren't even part of a series? It's almost as if she's a cameo… but no one knows who this Momota Asami-san is."

"And knowing her is my job. From here onward, rather than a great detective's deductions, it's the result of a realistic detective's duty…

meaning a missing person search, a background check. I searched for any Momota Asamis involved with Sunaga-sensei's life."

Though I had Konaka-san help out as well, Kyouko-san gave as a preface.

"I found her in less than thirty minutes… when he was around seventeen, she was a girl his age who lived in his neighborhood. It seems they had pledged their futures to one another, but she committed suicide."

I don't know the specifics, Kyouko-san said in a businesslike tone… suicide. I wonder what could have happened… I could imagine some possibilities but… perhaps Kyouko-san already investigated that far into it but decided to keep silent. Or perhaps she didn't figure it out, purposely stopping her investigations there.

The word suicide never came up in Sunaga-sensei's books.

Was that… because his childhood sweetheart chose that means to go?

"T-then… was February the month that Momota-san passed… is that why he did it?"

"No, it was her birthday. She was born in February. Anyhow, I think that declaring that Sunaga-sensei became an author to let Momota-san continue to live on in his novels, while romantic, seems a bit forced. There were any number of reasons for him to set out to write… but at the very least, it could have been one of his reasons, not deducing that feels just as forced to me."

To let the dead live on in his writing… normally, it might have been the sort of talk to laugh off. Having a character modeled after an acquaintance appear in a work was a common tale, or so it was easy to ignore as well.

But I could neither laugh off nor ignore her reasoning. It was because Sunaga-sensei had painted Momota Asami as a side-character. With a worldview of incidents that could become novels occurring left and right, nothing more than a side character… the sort of side character whose

name might not even come out, he had let her live a life wrapped in normality. He had her get married, he had her build a household… the natural happiness he gave her was even shocking.

As an ordinary person.

Depicting her as normal… was the wonder to it.

Kyouko-san surely thought the same… that's why her impression of the book changed.

It was the first time my impression of Sunaga-sensei coincided with Kyouko-san's…

"They were never something as simple as a palate cleanser… to Sunaga-sensei, these standalone books might have been the sole novels he wrote for himself alone. Without anyone noticing, without anyone saying a word, among his many works, his prolific writings, he buried his own treasure. The grand treasure hunt Sunaga Hirubee used his entire life as an author to make… unfortunately, apart from his debut work, 'Murder at the River's Depths', it seems the others didn't do good in sales and didn't sit right with the readers, but… when it came to this series alone, I'm sure Sunaga-sensei was fine with that."

"… Then Okitegami-san. This is the important part, but… even if your deductions are on point, why would that become the reason Sunaga-sensei didn't commit suicide?"

"Eh? On the contrary, why don't you get it? Kondou-san, I'm sure you've already read this 'Home Sweet Corn', haven't you?"

Kyouko-san seemed truly taken by surprise as she restored her sleeve– as if to say there was nothing left to do for her mystery solving and proof.

"Inside this work, the corn farmer is still lively and very much healthy. If he wanted to depict someone's life, then it's only a complete life once he writes in its end. Then this standalone seventh book can't be the end of

the series… when he still has to write Momota Asami's plain peaceful death scene, after facing life head-on for forty-five years, there's no reason for Sunaga-sensei to cut his life short."

7

There was much to consider. Even if we begrudgingly accepted Kyouko-san's deductions as truth, the human psyche was prone to fluctuation… in an instant he could feel weakness, it could all suddenly seem so inconsequential, and he could abandon the custom he had continued all his life, impulsively choosing death. In that case, saying there was no way Sunaga-sensei could choose death as he shouldered a trauma of his past lover committing suicide would make more sense, no doubt… in the end, now that it was impossible to discern Sunaga-sensei's true intentions, it was all nothing more than supposition. I could not deny that Kyouko-san's reasoning still ran along a vector favorable to the author as one of his fans.

So here, I must intentionally refrain from acknowledging the truth of Kyouko-san's deduction… instead stating only what I know to be true. Meaning, that after that, Sunaga-sensei's death was never announced as a suicide, he simply mistakenly took a little too much sleeping medication that night, what's more, it was stated to be completely unrelated to the death of the great author… and from his position of no authority, Kondou-san persuasion of Konaka-san and the sales department worked; the new release wasn't pushed forward, coming out the next February as scheduled. Of course, god knows what'll happen in the future, and to we living in the present, time had had its fill, and we simply dispersed in Sakusousha's staff canteen… Kondou-san had his next meeting to attend to.

"Kakushidate-san. Could you see me to my office on the way back?"

Just as I left the building, Kyouko-san brought up something like that… the road wasn't dark, and it wasn't as if I came by car, so it was truly a bizarre request, but there was no way I could decline it.

More so, that was where my personal problem took center stage… from here on was the mystery solving and the site of the trial.

Arriving at the Okitegami Detective Agency Building by bus, I escorted her to the reception room… at this point, you could call it a room I knew too well.

“Now then, Kakushidate-san, let’s have an adult talk.”

Kyouko-san placed her hand-brewed coffee on the table as she spoke with a smile… it was a cheerfulness that held a certain pressure to it.

“Is there anything you want to say to me?”

“What I want to say… before that, there’s something I want to ask.”

Urged on, I spoke… my resolve had been made long ago.

“The list of Sunaga-sensei’s works Kondou-san wrote up… you were lying when you said it was dropped in the dressing room. No matter how many times I think over it, there’s no way I would make that mistake. When I was so careful.”

“Yes. It was a lie.”

Kyouko-san answered without shying back.

“Why did you tell such a lie… Kondou-san was fed up with me.”

“That was a front I had to put up before Kondou-san. I perceived him as your precious friend, so I thought it would be best not to embarrass you in front of him. You didn’t want him to know, did you? That you nursed me while I was naked.”

“……”

She knew… she remembered.

I wasn't surprised, I got an inkling along the way. Once I calmed down, it was obvious. No matter how great a detective she was, it would be impossible to reach the truth from that list alone… she called in Occam's Razor, but that list was still too much information for the simplest answer. There was no way she could reach the answer with nothing but that inorganic table.

Though it would be different… if she had a hint to guide her in the right direction.

Right, just as it was with the treasure hunt in the villa, as long as she had a hint to point to the answer beforehand… for example, on the inner thigh of her left leg…

"… Meaning, what exactly happened? No, I just knew there was no way I could have dropped the list in the dressing room, and I still don't understand the situation whatsoever… though I could tell you actually knew who I was, but played dumb. You would have to have woken up sometime before I erased the hint from your body."

"Yes"

She nodded so easily I felt let down.

"To be more precise, by the time you lifted me in a princess cradle in the bathroom, I was actually already awake."

So right at the start.

I see, I did think she was sleeping too deeply, but… I accepted it because she had stayed up four nights, but come to think of it, by that point, even if she was bathed in cold water, Kyouko-san still managed to get some sleep…

"It looks like you're unaware, but I tend to be a short sleeper. The fatigue on my body aside, given a few hours, I can recover my mental fatigue."

I didn't know that one... no, I'm sure it was a hidden speck Kyouko-san kept as the forgetful detective's trump card. I felt like I had completely been played.

"Mn? But even if it was just for a few hours, if you fell asleep, your memory must have..."

"Yes, it was reset... therefore, when I regained consciousness, I had no idea what was going on. I was in complete confusion... and so, I decided to keep my eyes shut and pretend to be asleep."

That wasn't the decisive power of a person in complete confusion... by the time she noticed it, her memories were gone, she was naked, and she was being held up by a giant of a man. For her to pretend to sleep through that... what pluck.

"And strangely..."

On the verge of saying something, Kyouko-san stood from the sofa. There was still plenty of coffee for the both of us, so I wondered where she was going when she retrieved the kitchen detergent and paper towels and handed them over to me.

"Can I leave this one to you? It's confidential information, so I must dispose of it."

She said as she held out her sleeve-rolled left arm- the depiction of Momota Asami-san in seven works- to me. With no means to resist, as if spreading ointment over her, I gently erased the traces of magic marker on Kyouko-san's arm... just as I did the night before.

"Meaning... when I left to get supplies from the kitchen like that, you caught sight of the hint on your own left leg."

"It wasn't just the hint, my own identity written on my chest... the details of my job on my left arm, and the contract on my right arm as well. I deduced that you were the giant written on my abdomen."

Which means before I could carefully erase them, Kyouko-san had already read and memorized all the messages… that was just too much.

“Well, that alone still wasn’t enough for me to get my bearings. After that, when you moved to the bathroom to put the towel in the laundry basket, I swiped the list in question from a cardboard box containing a large number of Sunaga Hirubee books.”

I was actually searching for that unpublished manuscript I was supposed to be working on, but unluckily, it seems it was in the other box, and I didn’t make it in time to inspect it, Kyouko-san explained.

“You returned from the bathroom faster than I expected, so the most I could manage was to make off with one enigmatic sheet of paper from the box– before I hurriedly leapt into the bed.”

I thought she had terrible sleeping posture, so that’s what it was. But for her to feign sleep all throughout while I wiped her down and dressed her in undergarments and pajamas… just looking at it objectively, just what sort of scene was that?

“Once you left, I compared the hint and the list, and roughly arrived at the answer… the rest is just as I explained to Kondou-san. The only difference from reality is that I suspected a high probability you had put a gag order on Kondou-san, so I intended to hear out Konaka-san first from the start.”

“… If you saw through it that far, you could have just stopped me last night. The way things are, I really feel like an idiot here.”

When I shelved my own deeds to criticize her, “I missed the right opportunity to pretend to wake up, to be honest,” she answered.

“I love to see boys hard at work… and I got the feeling my safety alone was guaranteed if I continued pretending to sleep.”

That was true… no matter what messages were left on her body, there was a possibility I was just a hoodlum. With that in mind, Kyouko-san aiming

for my absence to rummage through the cardboard box was an act of brute courage.

"… I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm… back then, I thought that was for the best. But I was way in over my head, and the mere thought of me doing something beneficial to Kyouko-san is–"

"Ah, no, I didn't call you here because I wanted you to apologize. It was definitely embarrassing for you to see me naked, but I'm sure I'll forget all about it once I sleep and get up."

When the words of apology finally escaped my mouth, Kyouko-san answered as if nothing happened at all.

"And I said it, didn't I? It's pretty much thanks to you that I managed to solve the case. Looking at the result, it was because you took all of Sunaga-sensei's works off with you that I was able to narrow down my theory. In regards to that, I can't thank you enough… it's just."

Kyouko-san stood a second time, this time walking in the opposite direction of the kitchen—towards her bedroom. As I stayed seated on the sofa, "Follow me," she chided.

"Oh… Are you sure? You told me I definitely couldn't go in…"

"The one who said that was yesterday's me, right? What's more, you've already gone in and out a number of times."

Flicking on the light switch, Kyouko walked until she was right beside the bed before turning to me and pointing at the ceiling… the crude letters written over it.

'From today onwards, you are Okitegami Kyouko.
You will live as a detective.'

“The reason I called you here today is to silence you. You haven’t told anyone about the words written on this ceiling, have you?”

“Not a soul.”

The smiling Kyouko-san, only at that moment did she make a serious face as she asked me… flustered as I was, I gave an honest answer. I hadn’t told Kondou-san about the ceiling… because I had no idea what to say about it.

“B-but what does it mean? Who wrote this message?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it’s because I want to find out… that I’m working as a detective. I want to know who the ‘criminal’ is that forced me to be a detective.”

“…”

“But it really puts me at ease. Last night when you left, before I saw the words on my body, the first thing I looked at was the ceiling… the moment I know I’m Okitegami Kyouko, it’s like the gears all fit into place. Even if I have no memory… as long as I have that name, I got the feeling I’d be able to live another day.”

In which case, the letters on the ceiling were deeper rooted than I thought… they were in paint, so a kitchen detergent wouldn’t erase them, and in the first place, were they something alright to erase? They were also an important lead to search out the ‘culprit’ who made Kyouko-san into a detective.

“So I must ask you don’t disclose this matter. If it got out a detective is working as a detective by the word of some masked mystery, it will affect the credibility of this office.”

And for the first time since she entered the bedroom, Kyouko-san broke into a smile… it was her usual business smile.

A smile simply kind, simply gentle.

“I understand. I swear I’ll never tell anyone about it… Kyouko-san.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“I have a request of my own.”

“What’s this? Is it a request for a new job? In that case, you’d better wait for the day to change… in the end, I’ve been up ever since that moment, and that short sleep didn’t solve my sleep deficiency. I think I’ve learned something from this case. No, even if I learn it, I’ll just forget it, but–”

“All I’ve done to you this time around. The various betrayals and falsehoods I’ve worked. I’m begging you, would it be possible for you to forgive me for them?”

Hearing that, Kyouko-san blinked her eyes in apparent surprise… it was as if she was trying to say the matter was already settled.

“Hey now. I already told you not to mind it, didn’t I? Forgive you or not, once tomorrow comes around, I’ll–”

“But I won’t.”

I want today’s Kyouko-san to forgive me.

I said as I continued earnestly lowering my head… I was aware I was saying something stupid, and I think I simply wanted to put myself at ease.

But I was filled with regret.

Back at Sunaga-sensei’s villa, when we parted with the air still awkward between us… if Kyouko-san only had today, then I needed to reconcile

with her within the day. I needed to apologize and have her forgive me within the day. I wanted to make peace with her before she forgot. Even if it was a relationship that would disappear by tomorrow.

“If today’s Kyouko-san doesn’t forgive me, I’ll never be able to ask tomorrow’s Kyouko-san for help. I don’t want that. Even if you forget, I’ll always remember.”

I wanted Kyouko-san’s help in times to come.

“Strangely… it wasn’t that scary, you know.”

With my head still lowered, Kyouko-san spoke to me. Those seemed to be the continuations of the words she was about to say in the reception room.

“When I woke up in your arms. When you put me to sleep in this bed, when you wiped off the words on my body. I wonder what you call it, it actually set my mind at ease. If I leave it to this person, I’m sure I’ll be fine… I thought. Back then, I said I lost the right opportunity to wake up… but in all honesty, I think I wanted you to pamper me more, Kakushidate-san.”

“Pam… per?”

“My memories are reset every day, but that is to the end, a problem of the ‘brain’. My body and my heart are left to the wayside to continue on and on… they change day by day, year by year, but those bring an influence to my mind as well. Yesterday’s me is by no means the same as today’s me. If you’re wondering what I’m trying to say… my body remembers what I’ve experienced. The reason I could feel at peace and defenselessly leave my body to you was surely because to this point you’ve always been kind to me. In this matter as well, you didn’t have to tell me. I understood you were doing it for my sake.”

So please raise your head.

Kyouko-san said.

“I forgive you. So if you ever have the need, don’t hesitate to depend on the Okitegami Detective agency… is that enough?”

“… Yes. Thank you.”

I was happy.

She didn’t just forgive me… I was happy the relation I had somehow forged with Kyouko-san a number of times, the relationship that had been forgotten wasn’t for nothing.

No matter how many times it was forgotten, even if I had to start from square one every time we met… it wasn’t meaningless.

“Then let’s shake on it.”

As I answered in a shaking voice, Kyouko-san held out her hand… I hurriedly gripped it back, yet at the same time felt myself yanked towards her. It wasn’t a strong pull, but it was sudden after all, and I staggered forward.

“W… what is it? Kyouko-san.”

“Don’t be silly… Kakushidate-san, after all you’ve said, you never thought I would forgive you for free, did you?”

Kyouko-san gripped it tight, showing no signs or releasing me.

She made it sound like a joke, but her eyes were series. I guess despite everything, Kyouko-san still wouldn’t overlook a possible payment… of course, I didn’t apologize with half-baked resolve. “Yes. I’ll do anything. I know it’s nothing I can take back, but it it’s within my power, I’ll do anything to atone,” I said.

“Then,” There Kyouko-san held up the index finger of her left hand, touching my chest… she gently smiled.

“How about you show me your naked self?”

(Farewell, Kyouko-san– Case Forgotten)

Additional Notes

This is about Gifube Nagame's mother, but through Chief Emii, it seems she was introduced to a good ophthalmologist… as her declining eyesight was brought on by the years, even using the latest technology modern medicine had to offer, there was a limit to what could be done, but perhaps maintaining her current level of vision would be possible. It was a bit of a surprise, but I doubt that meant Lab Chief Emii was actually a good person… a genius of his level really couldn't be measured with the likes of my measuring stick.

The popular manga artist Satoi-sensei continued working steadily thereafter- this might be a digression, but there was nothing amiss with Kyouko'san's detective, strike that, woman's intuition, and it seems she proposed to Kondou-san the other day. If my total sales exceed twenty million, please marry me… I get the feeling Kondou-san took it as a child's joke, but now I wonder.

Kondou-san's work paid off, and Sunaga-sensei's posthumous work was published the February of the following year… despite its label as Sunaga Hirubee's final work, unfortunately, its sales were unfavorable. The fact it was a standalone was its undoing… if Momota Asami's name was attached to it, the numbers might have changed, but perhaps to respect the unspoken will of a late and great author, or because such a faint discredible deduction was determined unusable as a selling point, it was never publicized. By the way, the official title was made, 'The Cob of the Corn'… 'Home Sweet Corn' wasn't a bad title, but in choosing between the two, it seems Kyouko-san got some reward for staying up four nights. Well, I doubt Sunaga-sensei would be against it.

And I, Kakushidate Yakusuke… truthfully, I might just happen to still be in temporary retirement with some job hunting on the side. It's been quite a long time since I was unable to find work over such a long period… good grief, there are some terrible times we live in. Just writing up a resume makes me feel down, so lately I've gotten around to amateur hobby

writing to kill some time… I thought I might give shape here to the countless incidents I've been caught up in. No, I don't mean to say Sunaga Hirubee influenced my life… and it's not like I've completely run out of options so I've thrown everything away to become an author. In the first place, the story of my life involves nothing but fearsome cases I can't announce to the world at large. I don't plan on putting it out, this is nothing more than a personal record. If I leave records, I might be able to see a trend and put together some countermeasures next time I become a target of suspicion… and even if that isn't the case, they might prove useful in some way or another.

I've only just started writing, so knowing me, I might grow tired of it along the way, but for now, I've decided on the title of my first book.

'The Memorandum of Okitegami Kyouko'.

I'm sure it's a book I won't forget.

Postscript

If you say that everyone says that, then perhaps so could be said, but there are a number of times when I think it would be nice if I could freely control my own memory, meaning the ability to choose what I want to remember and what I want to forget at my own discretion, but, no, I can't say for sure whether that's truly a good thing or not, but if I remembered only the fun and interesting things and forgot all the terrible and sad, I get the feeling I'll be able to maintain a considerably healthy mind. A moderate amount of stress might be necessary for life, and a human soul might mature by overcoming pain, but even so, what's unpleasant is unpleasant. If possible, then after the soul has matured from that moderate stress and pain, I'd like for that experience to be cleanly wiped away. Well, it seems this talk is surprisingly not just an empty theory, and there are actually quite a few 'geniuses who forget the fact they put in effort' out there, it seems. While putting in enough effort to sweat blood, the sort of person that completely forgets it and falls under the pretension, 'This glorious bastard is overflowing with natural talent!'. I can't really tell whether that's being humble of boastful. That aside, in the case that I actually became able to control my own memories, in other words, when confronting the problem of how to choose the events I've experienced or stories I've heard, you could say I hold a large doubt over whether I'm capable of making the right decision. Rather, wouldn't it be impossible to determine what memories would bring you benefits, and which ones would not? … You know, perhaps I already carried out this thought experiment yesterday but just forgot about it.

This book is the case log of the forgetful detective—as always, the contents are such that I can't really tell if I've returned to the start or entered new territory, but I'm wondering if this is a mystery novel I was only able to write precisely because I wrote the Monogatari Series and Densetsu Series. Her memories reset every day, and that's precisely why she can strictly maintain a duty of confidentiality, the forgetful detective who solves any case in one day—and an unemployed university graduate who is simply dragged into cases, simply dressed up in false allegations. To Yakusuke-kun, being dragged into cases is a disaster, but because that means he can call Kyouko-san, perhaps it's tied to delight as well? Harsh and fun memories are two sides of the same coin, I guess. I hope the

punchline of this series isn't that, 'Yakusuke-kun finally commits his own crime because he wants to call Kyouko-san'... anyways, with that in mind, no, forget that. You've just read the first book of the Forgetful Detective Series, 'The Memorandum of Okitegami Kyouko'.

Carrying on from the Monogatari Series, I had VOFAN-san draw the title illustration. What a wonderful Kyouko-san. Thank you most dearly. I think Yakusuke-kun will write the second book in the near future, so I pray for your continued patronage of the Okitegami Detective Agency.

-Nisio Isin

This publication consists of original text, it has not been adapted from another medium.

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Born 1981. He made his debut in 2002, with his work ‘The Beheading Cycle’, winning him Kodansha Novel’s 23rd Mephisto Award. Starting with his Zaregoto Series, and the Monogatari Series, of which the first novel ‘Bakemonogatari’ became his first work to be adapted into an anime, he had written a great many novels.

Illustrator: VOFAN

Born 1980. A citizen of Taiwan. His representative work is the Colorful Dreams Series (MAXPOWER Publishing Taiwan), a collection of poems integrated with artwork. From 2006 onwards, he took charge of the illustrations and character design for the Monogatari series (Collaboration with MAXPOWER Publishing).

The Memorandum of Okitegami Kyouko

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